

COPING WITH LIVING, DYING, AND WHAT'S IN-BETWEEN: SHORT STORIES

A Thesis

by

ELISE MARIE ELLIOTT

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2009

Major Subject: English

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Coping with Living, Dying, and What's In-Between: Short Stories. (May 2009)

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Dr. Paul N. Christensen

My thesis includes a collection of short stories that showcases my growth and potential as a fiction writer. The thesis also includes a critical introduction that highlights my aims and the influences on my work.

My introduction seeks to establish the overarching purpose of creative work. Specifically, I focus on how my work reflects the theme of using projection as a defense mechanism to cope with internal and external crises that force characters to deal with undesirable situations or aspects of their personality.

The introduction then expounds on the commonly accepted Freudian definition of “projection,” as well as the related Jungian “shadow.” Both of these psychoanalytic concepts are closely linked to the doppelgänger. To expound on the tradition of using these concepts in literature, I list works that employ these themes and dispute the traditional association of such themes with invariably tragic endings.

Next, I attempt to explode the common assumption that links projection to dysfunction by pointing to both maladaptive and adaptive uses of projection. I point out that people can project both negative and positive aspects of their personality onto

outside entities with both positive and negative consequences. I then detail examples from my stories that reflect these uses of projection.

I go on to further expand the definition of “projection” by challenging the notion that people only project aspects of their personality onto other people and that this is a strictly psychological process, providing additional examples from my work. Finally, I illuminate how my stories seek to reevaluate the common assumption that the doppelgänger and the “shadow” are figures that foreshadow destructive outcomes.

Next, I move on to a discussion of the specific research methods and influences of each story, drawing on literary works and personal reasons for exploring my topics. I also mention how previous study has fueled my work on the themes in these stories.

The stories themselves are products of my purpose and research.

My conclusion relates how these stories reflect my theme and purpose and how they shaped my growth as a writer.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Christ, through Whom all things are possible.

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INTRODUCTION

What separates humans from other species is the communication of complex emotions tied to thought patterns that can engender empathy and drive behavior. My creative work attempts to delve into the psychological motivations of characters in order to engender empathy for those characters and allow readers to connect with the emotions that drive the characters' choices. My stories specifically seek to recapture the raw energy of familiar emotions through the detailing of the characters' psychological complexity. Ezra Pound shared this interest in recycling the old, instructing writers to "make it new." Similarly, Samuel Johnson once said that the "two most engaging powers of an author" are that "[n]ew things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new" (71). Coping with crises and the plethora of emotions that crises engender is not an unfamiliar theme in literature. However, I hope to rediscover the power of familiar emotions through an exploration of the complex manner in which characters use projection as a defense mechanism to cope with internal and external crises that force them to deal with undesirable situations or aspects of their personality.

The thesis title, "Coping with Living, Dying, and What's In-Between," reflects the protagonists' struggle to cope with conflicting emotions, birthed in a time of crisis, which presents them with a choice between behaviors and beliefs that will ultimately profoundly affect their physical or spiritual lives. Glenn E. Whitlock defines a crisis as

This thesis follows the style of the MLA Style Manual.

“a *decisive moment* or *turning point* that can be anticipated. It is the culmination point beyond which something crucial will happen” (Whitlock 3, emphasis in original).

In reality, people everywhere are presented with crises that force them to make difficult choices. Joseph Redfearn goes so far as to say, “Our psychological health demands that the defences and the cosy [sic] illusions of our narcissistic selves be periodically shattered by the awareness of the conflict of opposing forces within ourselves” (11). Since fiction attempts to capture or expose some aspect of reality, the question to consider is: How do “real” people with different cultural, intellectual, and spiritual backgrounds cope with choices presented them by an acknowledgement of these intrinsic “opposing forces”?

Psychologists such as Sigmund and Anna Freud and Carl Jung paved the way for a host of modern psychologists and psychological theory seeking to answer this question. Carolyn M. Aldwin describes the defense mechanisms used to cope with internal and external stressors identified by Anna Freud: “suppression, denial, projection, reaction formation, hysteria, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and sublimation” (100).

I am especially interested in the projection method of coping with emotional stress. Paraphrasing Sigmund Freud, projection is “the defensive attribution of unwanted thoughts, wishes, feelings, and related mental contents to some other person” (Sandler 2). In Jungian archetypal psychology, “the shadow” describes the unconscious side of the self onto which we project desires, beliefs, and values we believe harmful, negative, or inappropriate. As John Van Eenwyk puts it, “Archetypal shadow consists of the psyche’s ability to counterbalance consciousness through positing its opposite. [...] The

archetypal shadow is a creative force within the unconscious that alternately destabilizes and balances consciousness in order for psychological growth to occur” (98).

Projection as a coping mechanism and the unconscious “shadow” are closely related to the doppelgänger, the motif of the double, “constellated” during the German Romantic period and often explored in literature (Pizer 1). John Pizer contends that “contemporary Western writers often use the Double in exploring what they regard as the human individual’s innately divided psyche, torn between extremes of good and evil, avarice and selflessness, hatred and love, serenity and emotional chaos” (1).

I am interested in how personality is divided and how psychological change, whether progressive or regressive, can result from attempting to balance opposing emotions and desires. The stories composing my thesis explore the consequences of choosing to cope with intrinsic emotional warfare by projecting self onto others.

Several authors before me have treated projection and the doppelgänger motif in literature, including William Shakespeare, Hans Christian Anderson, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, E. T. A. Hoffman, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Oscar Wilde. Works involving the doppelgänger motif often relate the tragic consequences of a divided mind (and body), from the tragic deaths in Shakespeare’s King Lear, to the execution of a moral man by his evil shadow in Anderson’s “The Shadow,” to Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin’s madness in Dostoevsky’s “The Double.” Similarly bleak outcomes appear in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Hoffman’s “The Devil’s Elixir,” Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and Wilde’s Picture of Dorian Gray. Perhaps the most notable (and grim) explorations of projection

were written by Edgar Allan Poe in “William Wilson,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Man of the Crowd,” and “The Black Cat.” In all of these works, the protagonists’ fate most often includes death or derangement.

In my stories, I attempt to explode the common assumption that links projection solely to dysfunction by pointing to the adaptive uses of projection as well as the maladaptive uses. As Aldwin notes, “One problem with understanding coping efforts primarily in terms of defense mechanisms is that these mechanisms are, by definition, maladaptive in that they distort reality. However, most of us are not that maladaptive—at least most of the time. [George E.] Vaillant (1977) attempted to deal with this limitation by redefining defense mechanisms in terms of adaptive styles, with the explicit assumption that some defense mechanisms can be healthy and adaptive” (Aldwin 102).

Together, the stories herein attempt to expand the notion of projection to include projection of both positive and negative aspects of personality onto outside entities with both positive and negative consequences. In both “Tory” and “The Sandman,” the protagonist’s maladaptive use of projection ultimately leads him to an act of violence (“Tory”) and isolation (“The Sandman”), endings similarly tragic to those in the works cited above. However, as defense mechanisms are intended to help individuals cope in times of crisis, I use “The Shadows of Sabrina Green” to point to the positive aspects of projection, which help the protagonist, Sabrina, deal with her imminent death from leukemia. And, though a literal interpretation of the plot of “Tory” and “The Sandman” would lead one to believe that the stories end tragically, a figurative interpretation could lead readers to recognize positive implications of each story’s ending. For example,

Tory's murder could be interpreted as the metaphysical death of Richard's misplaced admiration for his cousin which marks his new-found confidence. Hence, Richard is able to reject Tory's cruelty and stand up for himself and the "innocent," represented by the injured dog that he associates with himself. In "The Sandman," the reader could conclude that the Sandman's projection of himself onto Lily resulted in Lily's abandonment and the Sandman's isolation. Alternatively, the reader could see the ultimately positive impact of the Sandman's projection. Namely, the Sandman realized that he cared too much about Lily's future happiness to continue to project his own identity (and thus his fate) onto her, choosing to sacrifice companionship for the sake of Lily's future.

The stories presented here seek to further expand the idea of "projection" by challenging the notion that people only project aspects of their personality onto other people, and that this is a strictly psychological process. In "Tory," Richard is a chronically ill fourteen-year-old boy who projects his sickness (and attending vulnerability and innocence) onto a dog. In "The Shadows of Sabrina Green," Sabrina projects her conflicting attitudes about dying of cancer onto her collection of dolls. Finally, in "The Sandman," the protagonist does project aspects of himself onto another person; however, this projection is manifested in a physical transformation of the person onto whom he projects himself, so that Lily begins to acquire similar physical attributes as the Sandman, in place of mental attributes (related to personality).

Finally, the stories herein seek to reevaluate the common assumption that the doppelgänger and the "shadow" are figures that necessarily foreshadow destructive

outcomes. Although Tory represents Richard's doppelgänger in a traditional way, Richard's ultimate rejection of his doppelgänger in order to save the dog (which he sees as an extension of himself) implies his willingness to accept his own limitations. In "The Shadows of Sabrina Green," the various personalities of the dolls that represent projections of Sabrina are, in fact, helpful in reshaping her attitude about her cancer. Even the dolls who represent the traditional "shadows" of Sabrina, such as Barbara, who represents Sabrina's negative view of death, and Cathy, who represents her inability to deal with death, eventually guide her towards the realization that these are unhealthy views. In this way, Sabrina's diverse projections allow her to externalize her conflicted emotions, and examine them with a more detached view. This helps her to navigate negative aspects of her personality so that she is able to extirpate them from herself. Additionally, Sabrina projects positive aspects of herself onto her dolls, as in the case of Markus and Joe, who are projections of her healthier views of death. This inspires her to readopt those healthy attitudes and thus force out her negative or harmful views of death.

In "The Sandman," the Sandman's projection of himself onto Lily acts as both his doppelgänger and shadow with unprecedented results. While most doppelgänger stories (like those cited above) detail the destructive influence of the doppelgänger, the Sandman's projection serves to ennoble his character by allowing him the opportunity to choose self-sacrifice to protect Lily. He could have experienced true companionship and love by continuing to allow the physical projection of himself onto Lily to take place. Her transformation would have allowed Lily to accompany the Sandman on his travels indefinitely and to possibly become a "sandman-like" character herself. However, as the

Sandman frequently repeats in the story, he “casts no shadow.” Thus, he cannot bring himself to continue to affect Lily’s transformation. The isolation of the Sandman in fact results from his divorcing himself from his doppelgänger (Lily transformed into an image of himself).

Apart from the psychological theme that threads these stories together, each story was inspired by my personal interests and research as a graduate student. “The Sandman” was heavily influenced by Magical Realist fiction by masters such as Franz Kafka and Leo Tolstoy, as well as folktales from various cultures: German folktales by the Grimm brothers, African folktales by Zora Neale Hurston, and Vietnamese folktales by Larry Heinemann. I was further intrigued by my thesis committee member, Dr. David Donkor, whose work focuses on African folklore. Studying Magical Realism and folklore convinced me that there was an opportunity to rediscover traditional folklore and place it within an American context. In Shay Youngblood’s playwriting course, I attempted to revitalize traditional folklore by concentrating my research on the well-known folk character the Sandman. During the course of my research, I found that little literary material featuring the Sandman—critical or creative—exists, and almost no literature which places this character as the primary protagonist exists. Storytelling Encyclopedia states: “While no actual myths or legends exist about the Sandman, he is a well-known imaginary figure who is a product of the folklore of mothers everywhere” (Leeming 407). This fact inspired “The Sandman,” which attempts to create an American “legend” featuring the folk hero. To create the character of the Sandman, I consulted various cultural representations of this popular folk figure, such as the Danish

“Ole Lukøje,” the Scottish “Wee Willie Winkie,” the French “La Dormette,” the German “Der Sandmann,” and the Scandinavian “Klaas Vaak.” Portrayals of the Sandman in many diverse works, from E. T. A. Hoffman’s “Der Sandmann” to various comic books and graphic novels featuring the Sandman, helped to shape my story’s rendering of the dark complexity of the Sandman’s character.

The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe heavily influenced “Tory.” The seemingly straight-forward plot of “Tory” attempts to resist straight-forward analysis by shifting the focus from the violence of the murder to the events that lead to a radical shift in the narrator’s thinking in a relatively short amount of time. Poe’s short stories “The Imp of the Perverse,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Black Cat,” and “Berenice” serve as a precedent of such a focal shift from the external action to the internal motivation and consideration of the act. These pieces work more as psychological studies than grisly murder mysteries, as was the intention with “Tory.” In addition, the ending of many of these works cause the reader to question the narrator’s credibility. The conclusion of “Tory” was written to be ambiguous enough to support multiple interpretations, including the fact that Richard may not be a reliable narrator. In addition, this ambiguity enables a literal versus symbolic reading of the murder.

“The Shadows of Sabrina Green” grew out of an interest in the manipulation of the Jungian concept of “shadow aspects,” as well as my own aborted interest in becoming a doctor. I have always been fascinated by the medical world, particularly mental illness and physical handicaps, and enjoyed the medical research that went into this story. My sister, Brinn Massengale, is a nurse, and my grandmother, Margaret

DuMond, is a retired nurse. My grandfather, Dr. Charles DuMond, is a podiatrist. Thus, this story gave me the opportunity to join my family in a long history of involvement with the medical community. Furthermore, works such as Mark Haddon's The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time and Daniel Keyes' Flowers for Algernon continued to spark my interest in the possibilities for fiction inherent in exploring medical phenomena.

At the heart of all of my stories is an exposé of the bevy of emotions that drive my characters' choices when faced with internal and external crises. As Whitlock notes, "Normally, a crisis will be resolved one way or another in a relatively brief period of time. The question is whether the resolution will be adaptive or maladaptive. Someone has pointed out that the Chinese word for 'crisis' consists of two characters. One character represents *danger*, and the other indicates *opportunity*. Together they represent *crisis*" (4, emphasis in original). In the end, my stories are meant to invite the reader to judge for himself the wisdom of the protagonists' final decisions resulting from their attempt to cope with their conflicting emotions through projection—to personally determine whether the characters missed or took advantage of opportunity.

THE SANDMAN

I cast no shadow. I'm not human. I used to be, but anymore. Now, I'm the Sandman—or one of them, anyway. You know, the guy with the bag of sand who gives children good dreams.

You want to know how it started? It started after my wife died. About a hundred years ago, I had a beautiful wife with marble smooth skin and hair the color of marigolds. Once she died in that car wreck, my house fell into disrepair, the cat starved to death, and all of the prize-winning peonies in our garden withered and died. I tried to plant something in their place, but nothing would grow.

With nothing left to live for, I stopped living. I became a thief, a beggar, a vagrant. After a while, there was a jail cell with my name on it. Literally. I carved it into the paint with my nails beside the name of my wife, Helen.

One night, a man (or what I thought was a man) came through my cell wall. Just walked through the wall and stood there, looking at me, with a cigarette in his hand and steam streaming from both nostrils. The room grew cold. I can't explain it, but I wasn't scared.

He told me he was a Sandman, one of a thousand who'd opted to exchange their current lives for the binding responsibility of living at night and travelling a set route to deliver dreams to children. He said he'd heard about me—all about me—and asked if I'd like to start over. I accepted the job on the spot. I wasn't really living during the day—why not try living at night?

The man grabbed my wrist with an icy hand and winked twice. With a whoosh of cold air, we passed through the walls of my cell and up a hill in less than a second. When we arrived, I stared open-mouthed at the prison, now over a mile below us. It looked bright and almost cheerful from the hilltop, the brilliant white lights illuminating the grounds like the candles on a birthday cake.

The man indulged my incredulity for a moment. “Take a last look,” he said. “You won’t be part of that world again.”

For the next few weeks, I received my training and learned all about the job. I mastered winking through walls, reading the minds of the children to know who needed what dreams, and distinguishing which colored sand in my bag meant which types of dreams: cerulean for surreal dreams, violet for adventurous dreams, salmon for sentimental dreams, and so on.

One Thursday, the man told me I was ready. He gave me route 297, Texas to North Dakota, and I went to work. Every night, I winked my way in and out of houses, sprinkling sand into children’s eyes according to what dreams they needed, before heading back to my lair beneath a tree in the Brownsville cemetery, the cemetery where Helen was buried.

The work kept me busy for a while. It was even exciting for a while. I had a purpose again, nearly forgetting about the life I’d lead before. But it didn’t take long to realize that I’d exchanged one hell for another. Year after monotonous year flew by with nothing to distinguish one from the next.

One night, while sprinkling sand into the eyes of a young boy, the boy's mother came in and flipped a switch near the door, flooding the room with light. She didn't see me, of course, since she didn't believe in me, but that didn't matter. It was my shadow that stopped me cold. It was smaller than it should have been, and flickered pitifully like the picture on an old television screen that shakes during a thunderstorm. Soon, my shadow disappeared altogether. Without my shadow, I'd never felt so alone.

I couldn't even take comfort in the companionship of the kids who woke up during my rounds. They invariably cried or screamed like that guy in Munch's painting. And it wouldn't have mattered if they did care. They all grew up. They forgot me. Even Lily forgot me.

Who's Lily?

She was the only one who ever smiled at me, or talked to me, or cared—the beautiful little girl who almost made me glad I took the job. Her light pink skin and her nose dusted all over with freckles made her look like a tiger lily. She had deep auburn hair and perfect white teeth.

The night we met I wasn't on the top of my game. I hadn't been sleeping well because of these troubling dreams. Well, just one dream, actually—over and over. In the dream, my wife and I were tending gorgeous, fiery-orange peonies in the garden: pruning them, watering them, getting irremovable grit under our fingernails. It was day-time... bright, beautiful day-time with the sun high overhead. I'd nearly forgotten what the sun looks like. It was frustrating to dream of my wife, the sun, and flowers drenched in colors that I'd never really see again. The worst part was when the dream finally

curled up like a dying spider and reality took over. When I woke up, I was in a hole in the ground and my wife was still dead.

The night I met Lily, I was preoccupied with wishing I was in my garden again. I sprinkled sand in the kids' eyes like I was adding Miracle-Gro to irises. All the blushes in the kids' cheeks that night looked like cherry blossoms. But then the kid would move in his sleep or yawn and pull up the covers, and I'd have to say to myself: You're not in your garden. You're not a gardener. You're just the Sandman, and no one will ever acknowledge that you're the one who gives them the flowers in their dreams.

But when I crept into Lily's room, something was different. I wasn't as careful as I'd always been, seeing as I was still annoyed about the whole garden thing. For the first time in decades, I tripped over a stuffed horse lying in the doorway, spilling vermillion-colored sand everywhere. The dog at the foot of the bed looked up, about to bark, but some of the sand landed on his fuzzy brown head. He went out like a light and began kicking in his sleep.

The noise startled the girl, who opened her eyes wide. But even after she saw me, she didn't panic or faint. She didn't even scream.

I guess it'd be worthwhile at this point to tell you that I might not be the most attractive-looking being on this planet. My skin is a little paler than others from all those years in the dark. You can see through it, in fact, right to the purple veins, and the whiteness of the bones shows through my skin. My eyes might be a little larger and shine a little brighter than most, but they're certainly not red or any nonsense like that. They're sort of misted over with that milky film that blind people have, and they glow in

the dark like a cat's. And it might sound very romantic when people say that I have raven-black hair, and it might go beautifully with the night motif, but that's not true either. My hair is almost as white as my face, and stands up everywhere, although it's clean enough. It must glow a little, too, because Lily told me once that my hair looks like a halo. That's much better than being called a white demon, which is what this one kid in Omaha called me. The point is, I scare most kids.

But not Lily. She sat upright in bed and stared at me curiously. I froze, unsure of what to do. It made sense to throw sand in her eyes and put her to sleep, so that the next day she'd think the whole thing had been part of an odd dream. But she looked so curious and wide awake, and I do get lonely. So I did what I should never have done.

"Hello," I said.

And she said, "Hello."

Just like that. As if I had been her father or her best friend or a neighbor she saw every day.

"What're you doing?" she asked, looking at the bag of sand.

"I'm the Sandman."

The girl raised her eyebrows. I bounced the bag of sand up and down in my hand until I got close enough to the bed to tilt it towards her. She stuck a finger in. The sand spilled over itself, revealing a fern-colored layer where her finger made a line across the top, and then a violet layer when she let her finger trail in the opposite direction.

"It changes color," she said.

I closed the bag and stood awkwardly. After one hundred years of nearly complete silence, I could tell I wasn't going to be a stunning conversationalist.

She squinted her eyes and looked at me in that way that makes mothers tug children's arms and say, "Don't stare—it's rude!"

"I thought you had black hair and red eyes," Lily said.

"Most people think that."

She smiled. "I had a wonderful dream last night. Was that you?"

I shuffled my feet, embarrassed by the compliment. "About a garden?"

She told me about her dream then, her eyes sparkling. In an enchanted forest, she found an emerald-colored flower that could make her fly when she put it in her hair. I told her that was one of my favorite dreams. She asked me why. Didn't I have lots of favorites?

"Well, yeah, but I love flowers and gardens, and... Well, what's your favorite?"

We must have talked for hours. More like she talked and I nodded, grinning stupidly. This had never happened before. The night faded while we were talking about apple pie. I didn't remember what it tasted like, so I asked her to describe it.

"Kind of like when it gets cold outside and you want to get warm from the inside out," she said. I wanted to tell her that I would die for the taste of that warmth on a cold night, to feel the heat in my stomach like a miniature sun. But before I even parted my lips, a shaft of the sun's first rays brushed my hand. I didn't have the chance to feel its warmth before I disappeared into my lair. It's in the unwritten rules. Any contact with the sun and I'm immediately whisked back to my lair. The darkness inside the hollowed-

out den of earth enveloped me more completely than the night had. There was nothing for me to do but dream of day.

The next night, I was in Dallas on my way to Ft. Worth when I had a thought. Lily lived in Springtown, my next stop. I'd been unusually quick about passing out dreams tonight—perhaps I could just spare a moment or two at Lily's to ask her to describe the taste of macaroni and cheese. But I didn't take the idea very seriously. I had a job to do. If I didn't do it, the kids would have nightmares, and echoes of their screams would rattle around my brain all day and keep me awake.

A week and a half went by. I gave Lily the most beautiful and colorful dreams I had: scarlet ones about Christmas, gold ones about daffodils, and indigo ones about eating warm apple pies during a snowstorm—whole pies, with no adults around to warn her about spoiling her appetite. She'd smile in her sleep, and I'd want to wake her so badly. I wanted to ask her what the color orange looks like in the day-time, whether it looked like I remembered it, whether it looked like the color of the peony blossoms from my dreams. But I didn't talk to Lily again.

That is, not until I found her sitting up one night, waiting for me. She yawned as I came in.

"It's so hard to stay awake and wait for you!" She smiled, stretching and blinking to keep her eyes open. "Thank you for the pretty dreams."

"Pretty dreams for pretty children," I said. As soon as I said it, I realized how corny it sounded. "I better go."

I turned to leave, but Lily sprang from her bed and pulled on my sleeve—the first

time I'd been touched by human hands in over seventy-five years. A warm, tingling sensation flooded my body, starting where she touched me and spreading outwards from there. I suddenly remembered what the sun felt like.

"Don't go!" she begged. "I have so many questions!"

"I don't scare you?"

I couldn't believe it. My bag of sand hung open and neglected at my side, spilling apricot-colored grains onto the floor. They disappeared with a tiny twinkle, like the last lights of dying stars.

"Of course not!" she said, her hand still on my sleeve. "How can you be afraid of someone who brings pretty dreams?"

After that, I made her a promise. If I could only pass out my dreams quickly enough, I would stop by her house. Then, she could ask me her questions. This arrangement suited both of us beautifully. I made Lily my first and last stop: first to give her dreams to amuse her while she waited for me, and last for her to ask questions.

The first night she asked me "How does the sand bring you dreams?" and I told her "It's magic, and it works because children believe in it."

The next night she asked me "How did you get to be the Sandman?" and I couldn't bring myself to tell her the whole, sad story, so I told her I couldn't remember.

She asked me if I dreamed, and I said, "Yes," although I didn't tell her that adults no longer receive their dreams. They make their own from deep inside themselves, too often dark and deep and dreary. I didn't tell her about my peony dream.

One night, she asked “What’s it like to live at night like a bat?” and I told her “It’s a lot like living in space the way the moon becomes your sun and the way the stars become your friends.” I didn’t tell her that it was as cold and quiet as space, with every color dulled as though in shadow, and all the while you can’t cast your own.

We went on in this way for a long time. She asked me all sorts of questions:

“How do you know what dreams to give?

“How do you get into rooms?

“Do you ever wish you weren’t the Sandman?”

I had to admit that sometimes I did.

And then one night, quite unexpectedly, she asked me, “Can I come with you?” It was so hard to explain why she couldn’t when she smiled like that. I told her no several times:

“What about sleep?

“Think of your parents. They’d die if they knew!

“What if anything happened? Anything at all? How could I live with that, Lily? Live *forever*, knowing something happened to you?”

She never asked again, but I could tell her spirits had fallen. I’d crushed a dream of hers. As the Sandman, I couldn’t stand the thought of crushing one of her dreams, especially one I’d inspired.

Her birthday was in one week. For one solid week, I told myself how utterly ridiculous the whole thing was, and how I could never take her on so perilous a journey so far from her home and her loving family... what if something happened? I’d never

forgive myself. But it was a week of wasted worry. I knew I'd break. The moment that I stepped into her room the night she turned eight, I broke. I told her that I had a special birthday surprise for her. The child clapped her hands in delight, and her blue eyes shone like morning glories.

"Come with me!" I whispered.

She beamed. "How?" she whispered back.

I took her tiny pink petal of a hand in my white, cold one. I'd never done anything like this before, but somehow, I knew it would work. We slid through the wall of her room effortlessly, and although her eyes became wider and brighter, she wasn't afraid.

"Watch this!" I said, almost boastfully, and I winked twice. With a great rush of cold night air, we appeared before the door of another house. She laughed out loud, and though I put my finger to my lips to shush her, I felt like laughing, too. All at once, the thrills of the job came back to me, and this time, I had someone to share them with.

As we travelled, we asked each other questions about life on the "other side." Confined to the dark, my questions centered on the half-forgotten wonders of living under the sun. She continued to ask about living at night. Time escaped us. All too soon, the dreams had been scattered from Brownsville, Texas to Sherwood, North Dakota, and children everywhere were turning frogs into princes or conquering dragons. Before sunrise brought the colors of the morning, I'd tucked Lily into bed, with a dream of fairies that I'd saved for her.

Looking back on that moment, I feel a wave of guilt and pleasure. Such a sweet girl and that first night so beautiful and clear! Can anyone blame me if I once became twice, and twice became often, and often became almost always? From that night on, I could never refuse her if she asked to go with me. Eventually, she could even distinguish among the dreams in the sand and would pick out the perfect ones for children who looked unhappy or lonely. Meanwhile, I became less shy and more talkative. Afterwards, we always shared a brief time to ourselves before I tucked Lily into bed and retreated to my lair, praying the night would come quickly.

A hundred nights went by this way. It took some getting used to. At first, Lily couldn't see well in the dark, and she tripped over her own feet, sticking close to me and gripping my hand tightly as we wended our way across starry skies. Often, her head would start to nod around daybreak, and she would lean against my shoulder as we travelled back to her house. I didn't mind. Lily had become my sun, the center of my universe. I still dreamed about my wife and those damn peonies, only the longing and the emptiness were gone. At night, with Lily's hand in mine, I forgot about loneliness.

Each evening, Lily sat Indian-style in the middle of her bed, looking like a butterfly poised on the pistil of a tulip, waiting for me. When I'd come in, she'd leap from the mattress and fly into my arms, making too much noise and smiling broadly. One of her parents occasionally popped a head into the room. They would shiver and tell Lily to go to sleep, "You have school tomorrow!" or "Lily, what's going on in here? We put you to bed four hours ago!" They never saw me. Or if they did, they saw straight through me.

Lily asked me about it one night.

“Why don’t they see you?”

I shrugged. “Adults don’t do magic. They don’t believe it; they can’t see it.”

Lily mulled this over.

“But you’re an adult.”

I laughed at that.

“Nah. I’m something else entirely.”

On those nights, I left her to make my rounds alone until her parents fell asleep. Then I’d come back for her, and we would wink our way through wind, rain, snow, sleet, and fog. I drilled her on the types of dreams in my bag, and the quickest routes from Oklahoma City to Topeka and from Topeka to Lincoln. She was a fast learner, but much too young and carefree to listen to my complaints about people with German Shepherds and children who twitched in their sleep. She told me stories of making mud pies and bringing her goldfish, Pickles, to show and tell. I stopped caring about German Shepherds after a while, and asked Lily to make real pies with me one day. I told her I hadn’t eaten in one hundred years, since I don’t really need to anyway. She promised she would. Those were the sunniest nights of my long life.

But it wouldn’t last. I slipped into Lily’s room on a clear fall night and knew immediately that something wasn’t right. She’d been restless the past few nights and her skin had gotten paler, her eyes duller. I told her she should miss a night or two of our travels so that she could get some sleep, but you know how kids get. You tell them not to touch the cookies before dinner, and suddenly, the only thing they want in the world is a

cookie. And the thought of those long journeys alone wasn't much incentive for me to make her stay home.

As time wore on, Lily got more and more used to the dark. At the sight of nightlights in the bedroom of a sleeping child, her freckled nose would crinkle, and she would squint her eyes. One night, Lily stepped over a stuffed dog lying in the door jamb of a little boy's room in Garden City. Two weeks ago, she wouldn't have seen it. None of the lights were on in the house.

She turned around. "Aren't you coming?" she whispered. "He needs a dream about fishing with his grandfather. His grandfather died before showing him the perfect cast."

How could she have known that? I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Her eyes—there was something about them. They were flat. They shone in the moonlight, certainly, but there was no sparkle, no color—only the traces of a whitish film. A chill went through me.

The weeks came and went. When Lily and I finished early, we would wink our way to the New York Botanical Gardens. Of all the millions of gardens I'd visited in my free time, I loved the ones in New York best. Those gardens sparkled like precious stones in a dung heap, little pockets of color tucked between the gray, drab monstrosities of concrete and iron.

The scene there was dazzling, but for whatever reason, this time I couldn't enjoy it. I didn't say much, and Lily had no questions for me that night. She rubbed her upper arms to keep warm. Her hands glowed in the moonlight, a stark contrast with the dark

fabric of her nightdress. Lamps created bright circles of illumination on the cobblestones. Lily carefully skirted the edges of each circle, walking a serpentine path around them.

We passed a bench, and Lily entreated me to stop.

“It’s cold,” she said.

“And I bet you’re tired, huh?”

Lily shook her head, “No.” She tried to smile, perhaps to reassure me, but it only served to unsettle me. Her fingers brushed mine in an attempt to hold my hand. They were cold, with little hemispheres of blue on the bottom of each fingernail. I crossed my arms and looked the other way so I wouldn’t have to see. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I thought she would fall asleep—I hoped she would fall asleep—but her eyes never closed.

Lily spoke after a long silence, so long that dawn would wake soon and spread her colors which were no longer meant for me.

“I don’t want to go back home. I wish I could just disappear during the day like you do.”

“You don’t want that,” I said, but she fixed her gaze on the east and said nothing.

That day, I dreamt strange and unsettling dreams. In one, the moon shone brightly, round as a Hilcrest Amour. I entered some kid’s bedroom and stood over him with my back to the window. The light of the moon cast my shadow on the child. My shadow! The kid woke up and saw me standing there. He sat up in bed. I couldn’t distinguish his face, covered in a fog-like veil, but his arms had a bluish tint from the

veins that showed through his skin. His large eyes shone white and stared out at me from a blank face, and his hair, the color of bone, stood on end. I could have been looking in a mirror, only something was wrong. The child spoke.

“I’ve heard about you—all about you. Do you want to start a new life?”

Suddenly, I hated him, this thing, this monster with glowing eyes. I put both hands around the child’s neck and pinned him to his pillow, slowly closing the circle of my fingers. The child gasped and put his cold hands against mine, trying to pry my fingers away, but I never relented.

That’s when the veil lifted. I saw the child’s face clearly, as though we both stood directly under the sun. The child had deep auburn hair. There were freckles across the bridge of the nose.

I woke in a sweat, with the moon already ascending the steps to its nightly throne. Unlike my dream, it wasn’t a full moon. I’d left my dreams behind, but that flush of fear, like falling off a precipice into nothingness, stayed with me. Ignoring the muffled moans of dreamless children, I winked my way to Lily’s bedside, expecting to find her poised like a butterfly. Instead, she lay prostrate on her bed, covered in blankets up to her eyeballs, which were open and glazed, glowing in the dark.

Whispers from the next room floated towards me, the deep-throated whispers of adults. To tell the truth, adults frighten me. They exist in a world of non-believers, one I no longer belong to. But that night I heard the unmistakable name of “Lily” and was drawn to the door.

When my eyes adjusted to the dim lights of the hallway outside Lily's room, I saw a full-figured woman in a cotton nightdress, weeping. A lean man in red-rimmed spectacles held her close, patting her back.

"It isn't like her, David! She sleeps all day, and now she can't eat and she's always cold as death..."

"Shhh, don't cry. She just needs more rest. You heard the doctor! It'll take time, that's all."

The two voices went on and on, but I couldn't listen long.

Lily labored to sit up in bed. I crossed to her side and put a hand on her shoulder to ease her back onto her pillow.

Lily attempted a half-hearted smile, but her face fell immediately. I pulled a handful of the dream of flying with the emerald-colored flower in her hair out of my bag and dusted Lily's eyes, but the sand rolled from them onto the floor and disappeared with a twinkle. She looked at me and said, "I'm not sleepy." That scared me more than anything.

"Try and rest."

"I can't sleep. I want to go with you."

I gritted my teeth. I didn't want to say it, but I had to.

"No."

And still worse, I turned around. I left.

The life I'm cursed to lead, with all its darkness and loneliness and cold—I wouldn't wish it on my own worst enemy. It couldn't happen to Lily. Not even if it hurt

like hell. Not even if it was going to be as painful as losing my wife all over again. Not even if it freed me from loneliness.

For the next few weeks, I checked in on Lily at least three times every night. Her mother always sat at her bedside, crying. When Lily didn't get better, I became preoccupied with her sickness and got more careless on my rounds. I tripped over more than one dog, door-frame, and toy, and woke up countless children, none of them as kind or understanding as Lily. Many were paralyzed with fear at the mere sight of me. I didn't sleep much, and the days grew longer and longer.

When I did manage to doze, I had fitful dreams, dreams of being in a sun-shiny garden where all of the flowers were dying. I'd water them and care for them and look at the sun and beg for its help, but it would laugh and tell me I had no right to be in its presence. Soon, I grew too tired to finish my rounds at night. This only exhausted me more, since the cries of dreamless children from Texas to North Dakota rattled around in my brain like marbles in an empty tin can, even during the day, and kept me awake.

Finally, the dreaded night came—the last night of our adventures. I should have known it would end this way.

I waited until her mother left the room for a cup of coffee with an extra jigger of Bailey's Irish Crème and appeared beside Lily's bed.

"Lily?" I whispered. "Lily, it's me!"

"I know," she said, smiling feebly. Her irises were now completely covered in a milky film.

"You see in the dark now, don't you?"

Lily stared out the window, twisting the ends of the drapes in her tiny fingers. “I want to go with you. I have to sit in bed all day and the sun always shines right in my eyes and it hurts.”

“You know,” I told her, taking her cold hand into my colder one, “I always thought the name Lily suits you. You look just like a tiger lily with your freckles and your pretty red hair.”

We didn’t say anything for a long time.

Finally, Lily asked, “What’s that noise?”

“What noise?”

Lily winced. “It’s like people are sad...like they’re crying.”

“You can hear them, too?”

She nodded. “It’s the others, isn’t it? The other children who need good dreams.”

I didn’t say anything. She wasn’t supposed to be able to hear them.

“I want to go and bring them their dreams.”

“Lily,” I began. “What about apple pies? What about Pickles?”

“What do you mean?”

I walked towards the dresser, carefully picking my way over toys and stuffed animals scattered on the floor. On top of the dresser in a round bowl, Pickles circled endlessly. I watched him swim for a while. I understood Pickles. I both envied and pitied him. Nothing to do but go around and around each night, and yet, when the sun touched the windowsill, there he was! Still right where Lily left him, able to look at her through the glass at any time of the night or day. How lucky he was!

But at night, the way the light of the moon came through the window, Pickles' bowl was enveloped in shadow. You couldn't see him from Lily's bed. That's the world I knew—looking and never being seen. Everyone, even stupid, ninety-nine cent fish, had a purpose. That was Pickles' purpose—to be seen. To be beautiful. And mine was to fade away. To cast no shadow.

“What I'm saying is... goldfish... they're only gold in the daytime. At night, they're boring. They're pale yellow, at best. They're not gold. Their scales don't shine.”

“What?”

“And mud pies, and apple pies. We can't make them together—there's no point! I don't eat them! I want to, but I don't. You know why? Because I don't need them anymore. I can't taste them!”

I didn't realize how loud my voice had gotten. I shouted, “You hear me? I can't taste them! Is that what you want?”

Lily's eyes widened, while tears came to mine. In all these years, I'd never cried—not when I lost my shadow, not even when I dreamed of losing my wife. Now, as the water slid down my cheek, I realized that even my tears were dark and cold.

“I think it's best if I make my rounds alone from now on. Perhaps it's best if we... say goodbye...”

“No!” she pleaded, sitting up with an effort.

I knew a long goodbye would be like a watering a rootless tree. I'd had my garden. I'd walked beside this beautiful flower night after night. We'd shared stories and laughter. But now she'd grow up. She had a purpose, and it wasn't the same as mine.

“Lily, I should go. Your parents worry it’s the night air... maybe it is. You just can’t live like I do. You’re not supposed to! And the others... I can’t just leave them! They’ll have nightmares! I have a job to do. Your parents are worried sick, and I am, too. I made you sick...”

“No!”

“I want to say goodbye. I have to.”

“No!” Lily screamed, “No, please!”

Footsteps echoed in the corridor. Any moment, the door would open, and her mother would enter. How could I let her hear Lily beg me, beg no one, not to leave?

“I have to go, Lily. But a hug first!”

Lily put her arms around my waist and hugged me until I could scarcely breathe. “Please don’t go!” she pleaded. Her cries seemed to drown out every other voice in my head.

“Lily,” I said quickly. “Just remember—whenever you dream about flying or gardening or eating apple pie... it’s because I’m thinking of you!”

Only seconds later, Lily’s mother came in. I winked and faded from Lily’s arms, passing through the wall until I stood on the other side. Through the window, I could see Lily staring after me, crying wildly. Her mother ran to the bed and wrapped Lily consolingly in the warmth of her arms.

“Shhh!” said her mother. “There, there now—it was only a bad dream!”

I'm still working the graveyard shift. They put up a bakery near Lily's house—the smell of cakes and pies baked fresh in the morning lingers into the night. I can smell them as I go by. But I don't look in the window. I don't wish I could taste them. Not anymore. My job is to concern myself with the dreams of children. The man told me the job was binding. For better or worse, I took the job. There's no going back now.

I used to visit Lily from time to time, even after she grew too old to be given dreams. She blossomed into a vivacious and beautiful lady. I would look in her window at night and watch her sleep, her arms wrapped around her husband, their child sleeping in the room down the hall. I always hoped that one day I'd catch her awake, that perhaps she'd have a dream that reminded her of me and wake her husband to tell him all about me. But adults make their own dreams, and they don't dream of magic. They don't believe in it. They think it's what makes them “adult.”

I want to make my mark, to leave something behind, to mean something to someone. But I can't. Why not?

Because my wife is dead. Because a few children see me for a little while, and it's beautiful for a little while. But they grow up. Then they forget.

After all, I'm no longer human. I'm the Sandman. I cast no shadow.

TORY

I'm going to kill something today. I don't know what. Tory makes all the decisions. He's my cousin, three years older than me, a junior in high school. High school's a pretty impressive place. Tory tells stories about what happens there and it sounds serious: all the fights and the girls and the stuff he doesn't want Aunt Cora to know about. I figure he knows more than me and has seen and done more than me—why not let him decide? It makes everything easier. I hate making decisions.

Right now, I can't decide if I should turn in a blank test or sit at my desk for the rest of the period writing illegible gibberish that Ms. Scholes won't like anyway. I go to write something, but my pencil falls into this deep rivet in the desk—probably carved by some pissed-off kid with an illegal pocket-knife—and I end up drawing long, black lines instead of the answers to “Who killed Hamlet's father? How was he killed?”

Who cares who killed him? The point is, he's dead, and it drove Hamlet crazy. At least, I think so. I didn't read the play, but it's pretty common knowledge that Hamlet goes crazy. Either way, I don't know who killed his dad. Maybe he did. Maybe that's why he went crazy. I go to write “Hamlet did it,” but only get as far as “Hamle” before I have one of my coughing fits. I use both hands to cover my mouth, but people still look at me like I'm doing it on purpose. I stop coughing and try to finish writing, but my pencil slides into the rut. I give up. I don't know how Hamlet did it anyway, which means I'd have to make it up, and that's against my principles. I've done a lot of stuff I shouldn't have, but I'm not a liar. I don't know how Hamlet killed his dad.

I turn in a blank test and sit back down to stare at the clock until school's out. Actually, it's not completely blank. It's got my name at the top, Richard Pratt, but Ms. Scholes doesn't care about that. Ms. Scholes only cares about boring dead authors and whether her skirt is smooth. She's always talking about Shakespeare or Dickens or Hemingway and smoothing her skirt. She rifles through the pages of my test, and one eyebrow slides up past the rim of her glasses. Then she walks over to where I'm sitting and puts it back on my desk without a word. I want to tell her that I can't lie about Hamlet, but I know she won't care. She wants to make a liar out of me. She doesn't like me, I can tell. She probably thinks I'm contagious, which I'm not, but I don't blame her. Lots of people think I'm contagious. They avoid me like the plague. I don't know what I have, but it's not the plague. The doctors say it's probably something to do with my immune system, something about A and G immunoglobulins. Or A and C. Or G and C. Or are those parts of DNA? I don't pay much attention in biology, either.

Anyway, I get sick. A lot. In fact, they have a doctor's note on file in the office that says I can miss school any time because I get sick so much. The note says that people should be sympathetic, but it doesn't keep people from judging me and giving me dirty looks, like the one Ms. Scholes gave me when she saw my test. You'd think she'd have some compassion, but nobody does. Not really.

I look around. Everyone is at their desk, practically sweating from thinking so hard. To my left, Laurel checks her answers for the third time, but I can't concentrate. The second hand on the clock takes way more than a second in between ticks, and the minute hand barely moves at all. I really want school to end so I can go hunting with

Tory, but I'm a captive in English class, like that guy in *Kidnapped*. I don't know his name 'cause I didn't really read that, either. It's not helping to watch the clock, so I pick up my pencil and draw long, black lines on my paper, thinking about ways to kill Hamlet's father.

I know how Tory would've done it. He would've shot him right in the chest. Tory's an unbelievable shot. My uncle taught him before he died in that hunting accident. Tory tells me that his dad got gored by a wild boar in the woods behind our house. I think he's lying, but I don't say anything because Tory has principles, so he couldn't be lying. I asked Tory once why his dad didn't just shoot the boar since his dad was such a great shot, but Tory told me that the boar was all mad and was going too fast and to shut the hell up. Mom says that Tory's dad fell on his own rifle— a “freak accident.” I don't know what to make of that because Mom has principles, too, so she can't be lying, but I know that one of them is lying. I just don't think about it.

I try to think about Hamlet instead. Why did he kill his dad? Maybe that was a freak accident, too. Maybe Hamlet felt guilty, and that's why he went crazy. I draw more black lines on my paper.

Ms. Scholes walks over to my desk again, smoothing her skirt.

“Ricky, you're not using your time very wisely.” She squats by the side of my chair, and I lean as far away as I can. The class looks at us and a few kids raise their eyebrows. Even Laurel looks up, which is pretty embarrassing.

“You've been watching the clock. Do you have somewhere to go?”

Yeah. Hunting with Tory. Since Tory's dad died, he goes hunting almost every day. He says he's going to kill the sunuvabitch boar that killed his dad. I always tag along. I'm really lucky—the neighborhood kids look up to him like he's John Wayne, or maybe Pecos Bill or Wild Bill Hickock, but I'm the only one that gets to go with him because I'm his cousin.

Cousins are as close as you can get without being brothers. I like it when Aunt Cora says, "Tory, you have to take him. He's your cousin."

Tory's especially great for a cousin because he's good at everything. Fish jump into his lap at the lake. Doesn't even need a rod. He knows the words to every Willie Nelson song by heart. I can hardly remember anything, but Tory can remember the words to all the good country songs. And he's a good student, which makes the family happy. They're not very happy with my grades. I think they should be more sympathetic.

"Ricky," Ms. Scholes says. "Class will go by a lot quicker if you use this time to concentrate on your test. Only twenty minutes left!" She walks away and I stare at my paper. I even start to write something, but my pencil falls in the rut, and I go back to thinking about hunting.

Tory said he'll tell me what to shoot once we're in the woods, and that I have to be prepared for anything except wild boars, because it's his job to shoot all the boars, in case it's the sunuvabitch boar that killed his dad. I have to admit, I've only ever tried to shoot one thing: a turtle. A *turtle*—perhaps the slowest thing in the world—and I swear the damn thing literally *crawled* away while I tried to make myself pull the trigger. That turtle probably laughed at me for being such a damn lily-livered coward. Tory laughed.

Tory couldn't *stop* laughing. But what did that turtle ever do to me? He didn't insult me. He was just sitting on a rock, minding his own business, while I pointed my gun at him, ready to blow him out of his shell.

"Save your bullets for something that can actually run away," Tory had said. I've been saving my bullets ever since. I'm just as happy to do the scouting. You have fewer decisions to make when you're scouting. Besides, Tory's the good shot. But today I'll get my chance to make up for my everlasting shame, the Great Turtle Incident. I don't think I'll be a good shot, but maybe I will be. We'll see.

Only ten more minutes now. My pencil's fallen into the rut so many times that the lead's cut right through the paper. It has slash marks all over it as if I were gutting it like a fish. I've seen Tory gut a million fish. Scales and tiny, invisible bones go everywhere. He makes it look like someone dropped a miniature atomic bomb in the middle of the carcass, like the limp fish is Japan and its tiny chest cavity is Nagasaki. I'm not convinced he does it right, but I don't say anything. I bet he doesn't know I don't like it when he does that. The poor fish always look so dumb and helpless while he's ripping their fins off, staring with their glass eyes but not seeing, their mouths open but not screaming. Tory always gets the gore all over his hands and wipes it on his jeans. He's pretty into blood and guts.

I wouldn't want to gut a fish after watching Tory, but I never have to, anyway. Tory says I cough on the meat, so he never asks me to help. Tory's a lone ranger, just like the one on T.V. I guess that makes me the side-kick, like Tonto. Only a little paler. And frailer. And sicker, with a cough.

The bell rings, and I'm saved. Beside me, Laurel shoves a pencil and a cupcake-shaped eraser into her purse. I decide to ask her about Hamlet.

"So," I say. "How'd Hamlet kill his dad?"

Laurel flips her curly yellow hair and points her nose to the ceiling.

"You're not serious, are you?"

I'm serious, so I just stand there, waiting. She hitches up her purse on her shoulder and gives me this look like I'm a hair in her food.

"Will you tell me if I can guess?"

She doesn't answer, so I give her my gut instinct. People are always telling you to go with your gut instinct.

"Hamlet shot him, didn't he?"

Laurel sighs, like it's so exasperating to answer a simple question.

"Guns would be an anachronism."

Whatever the hell that means. She could be making fun of me, for all I know.

"Did you even read the play?" she asks.

"No." Like I said, I can't lie. Principles.

Suddenly, Laurel laughs, as if honesty's funny. "Fair enough," she says. "Listen, Sicky, the test is over. Who cares?"

I hate it when people call me that. My name is Richard, but everybody says it "Ricky" and then changes it to "Sicky" like it's so funny and original.

"Damn it, Laurel, are you going to tell me or not?"

She looks offended and takes a step back.

“Geez, Ricky, just kidding. His dad didn’t get shot, he was poisoned. In the ear.”

“Wow,” I say. Poison in the ear. Good thing I didn’t write anything down. I never would have guessed that. No wonder Hamlet went crazy. “I would’ve just shot him in the chest.”

“That’s kind of sick,” Laurel says.

“Stop calling me that!” I yell.

Laurel gives me an odd stare, kind of like the one Ms. Scholes gave me, but a little different. I can tell Laurel doesn’t like me, either. She runs out of the room like I might make her sick just by standing next to her. Sheesh, these people have no compassion.

I start to head out the door when I feel a hand on my shoulder. Great. I turn around and Ms. Scholes is giving me this “I’m worried about you” look. Every member of my family perfected that look years ago.

She picks up my test. It’s still blank except for my name. There’s no escaping the lecture I’m about to get, so I collapse in the nearest seat and give this loud, long sigh which means I already know what she’s going to say. Only she doesn’t say what I think she’ll say. Instead of asking me why I didn’t do my test, the skin between her eyebrows gets all puckered. She takes off her glasses and sits down at the desk in front of me.

“Richard, are you okay?” she whispers.

What’s that supposed to mean? I know she hates me and she doesn’t really want to know if I’m okay.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

She looks around like she's hoping a cue card will pop up out of nowhere.

Finally, she says, "I know you get sick sometimes, and that can be... hard."

She thinks she's being compassionate, but she doesn't know what compassion is, and it's too late, anyway. It's halfway through the school year.

"Doesn't matter," I say.

The clock ticks away. If she hadn't started blabbing, I'd already be on my way to meet Tory. Now he'd have to wait for me.

Ms. Scholes had been fidgeting with her glasses, but now she looks me right in the eyes. "I just wondered if you'd like me to find somebody in class who can... you know, help you out. In case you have to miss class."

"I don't need help," I say. "I have Tory."

The look on Ms. Scholes' faces changes to one I've never seen before.

"Tory?"

"Yeah, Tory Jacobson" I say with pride. "I'm his cousin."

Instead of looking impressed, Ms. Scholes looks even more concerned.

"I didn't know that."

That offends me a little, but I'm not surprised. Most people forget Tory and I are related. You'd think people would know just by looking at us. I look like Tory a little bit: same blonde hair and blue eyes. I'm a little shorter, with freckles, but I'd still say we could pass for brothers. Tory doesn't think so, but my Mom says she thinks so and I think so. Maybe people don't realize we're related because Tory's so much cooler than me. I can't even shoot a turtle. I also cough a lot, which scares the animals when we go

hunting. It infuriates Tory when I do that, I can tell, but he doesn't say anything because he's sympathetic.

"I had Tory in class three years ago," she continues, even though Tory's waiting for me. "He's a very smart boy, but..."

She looks so upset that I stop wondering when she's going to stop talking and start wondering what she means.

"But what?" I say.

"Maybe you could find someone from our class. Somebody to look over your work, bring you assignments..."

She doesn't get it, I can tell.

"I have Tory."

"I understand that, but Tory's... well, he's not very..."

Ms. Scholes looks around the room again and starts smoothing her skirt, looking for a word. Finally, she says, "Well, he's not very compassionate. I mean... not very *patient*."

That takes me completely by surprise.

"What do you mean? He's always been patient with me!" I say, more indignantly than I had hoped to say it.

Ms. Scholes gets this very far away look in her eyes and pats my head like I'm some sort of dog. "Yes, I'm sure he's different with you," she says.

Suddenly, I'm filled with rage over what she said. How dare she say that he isn't patient! That he isn't compassionate! Tory has principles. Even if he is a little mean

sometimes, who can blame him? His dad got killed by a wild boar for crying out loud! Who wouldn't be a little mean and a little impatient after that?

"You're the one with no compassion!" I yell at Ms. Scholes and run out of the classroom without even turning around.

When I reach the west entrance doors, I look around for Tory, but I can't find him anywhere.

"Damn!" I say out loud, half hoping some teacher will hear me and tell me to cut it out. But no one's there. Not Tory, not anybody. It's all Ms. Scholes' fault. Tory probably got sick of waiting, and who can blame him? I probably wouldn't have waited for me, either.

Perhaps Tory's waiting for me at home. I try to run back to the house, but I start wheezing like a dog straining on his collar after he sees a cat. I give up and walk as fast as I can, until my shins burn and my backpack feels like it's got a body in it. I'm sweating when I get to my house. I go right past it to Tory's. I can see Aunt Cora through the kitchen window. She's basting a pink, goose-pimplly chicken. It looks like there's a hole in one of the little angular wings. I'd bet a million dollars that Tory shot that chicken himself. Tory said that one time he shot a bird in the head in mid air, and not a big bird, either, but a little sparrow-looking bird with a tiny head. You have to be pretty accurate to shoot a little bird right in the head, a head no bigger than a quarter that looks even smaller when it's flying a hundred feet above you.

After letting myself in, I ask, "Where's Tory?"

“Not here. Went out shooting twenty minutes ago,” Aunt Cora says. She doesn’t turn around or even look up. Tory’s whole family is too cool.

“Can I borrow a gun?” I say. “Tory’s going to teach me how to shoot.”

She motions with her hand over her left shoulder, which I immediately understand to mean, “The garage is out back. Help yourself.”

I run through the kitchen into the hall. As I’m going through, I see they’ve put up a new picture of Tory holding the antlers of this huge deer. I was there when he shot it. If you look really close, in the left corner of the picture, you can see my leg and my black boot. There aren’t too many pictures of me holding the antlers of huge deer.

I don’t actually like hunting very much, but I’ve never said that out loud because Tory loves it so much. He says, “A man’s not a man unless he can hunt.” I think he got that from his dad. I can’t very well tell Tory I don’t like hunting when it’s what a man does. He must know it, though, first because of the turtle thing, and second because he told me that today he’s going to teach me how to grow a spine and be a man. He clapped me right on the shoulder and looked me square in the eyes and said that today would be the day I kill something.

I’ve always gotten kind of panicky right before he shoots anything, which is really embarrassing. And when I think about using a gun— actually moving my finger and deciding the fate of some helpless creature— I get a little queasy, like when I got stitches in my shoulder in third grade. Even my sister didn’t cry when she saw the blood pouring from a gash almost two inches long, and I cried for about two hours. But I’m not eight anymore. And Tory *is* patient.

I burst through the screen door on the back porch and head down to the garage. The “garage” is actually a shed about a quarter mile behind the Jacobson house, way out of sight of the road. It’s too inconvenient to keep a car there, so they keep it stocked with old tools and a bunch of Tory’s shotguns. Tory gets a new gun every year for his birthday. He keeps them lined up, leaning against the wall like a row of defiant James Deans, but he only ever uses the one his dad gave him before he died. That means I have plenty to choose from. I’m too excited to get picky. I grab the one closest to the door and head for the woods.

I stumble around for more than an hour, looking for Tory. On my way, I see two rabbits right in front of me. The weird thing is, they look right at me, but they don’t run. They just keep on chewing berries like they assume I won’t shoot them. For half a second, I consider shooting them. I told myself a long time ago that I wouldn’t shoot anything unless it attacked me, like that boar attacked Tory’s dad, but that’s probably stupid. Tory shoots stuff all the time without ever thinking about it. How cool would it be to find Tory and strut up to him, holding two dead rabbits by the ears? But I don’t do it. If I hit one then I’d scare the other off, and you can’t kill one of a pair. It’d be cruel. Besides, Tory said he’d tell me what to shoot. And what if I tried to shoot them but I missed? I couldn’t handle a Great Rabbit Incident. It’d be too much, after the turtle thing.

After a while, my short-sleeved T-shirt isn’t cutting it and I start to shiver. The sun isn’t down yet, but it’s on its way, making the brown leaves on the ground temporarily red, yellow, and purple. I’m thinking about giving up when I finally see him.

He's crouching with his gun pointed at some unseen critter. He'd be stealthier than an invisible panther, if there was such a thing. Unfortunately, I'm not as stealthy. I try to hold it in, but I never can. I cough, which throws Tory off-balance. He teeters on his haunches before falling straight on his ass. The gun goes off, and we both know two things: he missed, and whatever he was aiming at isn't there anymore.

"Hey, Tory," I say.

"Dumb shit," he says. "I told you not to cough while I'm aiming." I don't pay any attention to him. That's just Tory's way of saying hello.

Tory's ruthless on the hunt, which he says commands a lot of respect. He kills anything that moves, and I mean anything: ducks, cats, bugs, frogs— anything. He's almost killed me a couple of times, but I'm pretty fast and I always jump out of the way just as the bullet whizzes past my ear. It's intense. It's hard not to get mad at Tory when he almost kills you, but he's so cool about it that you start to wonder if he really did almost kill you. He says he's sorry, all cool, and rests the butt of his gun on a pile of leaves as he cleans out the barrel with his pinky finger, wiping the grease on his jeans. He doesn't even look at you when he says he's sorry because he's too cool. His hat always covers his eyes. Every kid in the neighborhood wishes they could be as cool as Tory, with his eyes squinting under his hat and sweat running over his face as he cleans out the barrel of his gun, not even looking at you. So I just brush myself off and shrug one shoulder like it was my fault that I was in his way anyway. After all, Troy is pretty incredible. You can't stay mad at incredible.

“You told me you’d make me a man today,” I remind him, patting the old shotgun.

“Why’d you bring that one? That’s my gun.”

Tory spits in the leaves. I don’t answer.

“Besides,” he says, “That’s a piece of shit gun.”

“Yeah,” I say, looking at it. Looks like a nice, new gun to me. “I just picked the one closest to the door ’cause I was running late.”

“Late?” Tory asks, spitting again. Tory always spits when he’s hunting. It’s what men do, he says. His father used to do it.

“Yeah, late. You’re teaching me to shoot today, remember? No more scouting.”

“No more turtles, either,” I joke when Tory doesn’t answer. “You said you’d tell me what to shoot and you’ll make a man outta me.”

Tory shoulders his gun and tips his hat back to reveal a broad forehead with wiry blonde hair sticking to it from dried sweat.

“I’m ready,” I say.

Tory cocks his head, “Follow me.”

We walk a long time in silence. It’s nice walking with Tory. We don’t have to say anything because the woods and the guns and the unseen animals and the sun sinking behind the trees do all the talking. I just follow Tory in silent anticipation, waiting for him to tell me what to do.

For a couple of minutes we don’t see anything, and I hate to say it, but I’m glad. Out of nowhere, I get this vision of Hamlet going crazy after putting poison in his dad’s

ear, dancing around and yelling things like an inmate in some dark, run-down old asylum. Then I have another thought. Will I go crazy when I kill something? But that's being a coward. Besides, putting poison in somebody's ear is a lot different from shooting a wild turkey or something. I look at Tory up ahead. He breaks off a twig and puts it in his mouth, twirling it around lazily as he walks. He's not crazy, and he's killed a million turkeys. I decide I probably won't go crazy, either.

Finally, when the sun is almost completely gone and we're getting pretty far from home, Tory stops. He points to a bush and chews on his twig.

I don't see what it is yet, but I get my gun ready. I crouch just like I've seen Tory crouch a hundred thousand times, putting my gun on my shoulder like he does. I even spit, although I have to cough right afterwards. The cough gets the attention of whatever it is, and it comes out into the middle of the clearing. A perfect shot. I have a clear, open, perfect shot. But I don't take it.

"Go on, shoot," Tory whispers.

But I can't shoot it. It's a dog, a medium-sized, brown and white spotted mutt. It's got these droopy brown eyes, and its tongue is kind of half-hanging out of its mouth. It looks at us for a second like it's trying to decide if we're friendly or not. It must decide we're not, because it starts to walk down the path away from us, but something is wrong. It's going so slow. That's when I realize— it's only got three legs.

"Shoot it," Tory says.

I lower the barrel of my gun a half-inch, thinking.

"I can't," I say. "It's a dog."

“I know,” Tory says. And he does know. Tory’s shot about a half-dozen dogs.

“But he’s only got one hind leg,” I say.

“Makes it easier,” Tory says, and spits. “Since it’s your first time.”

I raise the barrel again and try to concentrate. I was cold three minutes ago, but now the neck of my T-shirt and under my arms sport gray half-moons of sweat. I start coughing. I’m not exactly trying to scare off the dog, even if I hope that’s what ends up happening. But instead of continuing to walk away, the noise I make stops the dog in its tracks, like that sound was some sort of secret code that the dog was waiting for, and it struggles to turn around. It has to sit on its butt and spin in order to face us. It keeps half-falling over as it tries to approach me.

“Now,” Tory whispers. “Shoot him now or they’ll be no sport in it. It’s still about fifty yards off.”

“No sport?” I say. I don’t want to say anything, but Tory wants me to kill a three-legged dog. “How can it be sport to kill *him*?”

“Shoot it, you dumb-ass, before it’s too close.”

The dog stops again and sits for a moment, panting, while I crouch, racked with indecision. Suddenly, the dog makes this weird little noise— not quite a whimper and not quite a bark.

“Tory!” I say. I say it loud, and hearing it, the dog struggles to its feet again.

“Tory, did you hear that? That dog just coughed!”

“Yeah, so?” Tory says, bored with my procrastination.

“So I can’t shoot a sick dog,” I say. I thought that would be obvious.

“Why not?”

I stand up and Tory looks confused. “What are you, too chicken?” he says. “Just do it!”

In the distance, Tory’s mom shouts, “Dinner!” It sounds like she’s a hundred miles away, like we’re in a new dimension and the echoes of our old world have come back to haunt us.

“Dinner,” I say, knowing it’s a lame attempt.

“Shut the hell up and shoot,” Tory says. “We’re losing the light.”

I don’t know why, but when I raise up the shotgun and look through the little eyepiece to aim, I don’t see a brown dog. I see Laurel’s face, all scrunched up, calling me “Sicky.” I see Ms. Scholes’ face with her eyebrows all puckered, asking if I’m alright. I see Aunt Cora, not looking at me. Finally, I see Tory telling me he’s sorry for almost killing me, not looking at me.

Without realizing it, I’ve lowered the gun. The dog coughs again and I finally decide. I don’t care what Tory says. I’m not shooting the dog. I’m a little sad because I thought I was going to be a man today, but I don’t think that even big, cowboy hero men like John Wayne or Pecos Bill or Wild Bill Hickok ever shot a sick, lame dog. Tory must know I’ve decided because he raises his gun as soon as I lower mine.

“What are you doing?” I shout. The dog is only fifteen yards away now.

“Don’t!” I say. “Please!”

Tory puts one hand out and sends me sprawling on my ass. Suddenly, I see Ms. Scholes’ face again, telling me Tory isn’t patient.

“I thought you had principles!” I say, getting up and brushing myself off. I grab my borrowed gun while Tory takes careful aim. I know he’s going to shoot the dog. It coughs again and keeps coming toward us with sad, sick little limps, like a soldier who’d just gotten his leg blown off by a land mine. He’s looking straight at me.

“What did that dog ever do to you, huh?” I scream. My voice cracks a little when I say it, but I’m not even embarrassed.

“You know,” Tory says, all slow and slick, still aiming at the dog. “You’re a sad little excuse, Sickie.”

He probably said that because I started coughing when he pushed me. I get really furious all of a sudden.

“Yeah?” I say, “Well, you aren’t very compassionate!”

Tory lowers the gun for half a second, and then raises it again and laughs. His finger is on the trigger and he starts to squeeze it slowly.

“God, you’re pathetic!” he says under his breath. But I hear him. I hear him loud and clear.

I look at the dog looking at me, and something about the whole thing makes me sick. Not the kind of sick that makes you cough. The kind of sick that you get when you forget to feed your pet bird for a few days and it dies, or when you see a little kid getting screamed at for doing something you know he didn’t do. And when the dog coughs again, I get sad. Sadder than I’ve ever been in my whole life.

After one eternal second, in which the woods and the guns and the unseen animals and the sun sinking behind the trees have stopped talking and the whole world is silent, the loud and horrible sound of a bullet rips through the still, cold air.

Tory slumps to the ground, his hands still clutching his gun. I rush over and shake him, but he doesn't look at me. He never does.

I wonder if I'm going to go crazy like Hamlet.

THE SHADOWS OF SABRINA GREEN

“You got Peterson’s chart?”

Nick, one of the textbook megalomaniacal residents at Westfield General, waits with his hand out. Brenda picks up the chart next to his elbow and puts it in his hand before returning to the IV she’s prepping.

“Did it last night. He’s up to four milligrams of morphine an hour,” she says.

Nick looks at the chart and smirks.

“This’ll keep him from getting crotchety with the staff!”

“Won’t even make a dent,” Brenda says, without looking up. Nothing makes the crotchety ones less crotchety. Nothing makes the crazy ones less crazy. For example, Room 249 keeps wandering down the hall naked, complaining about the consistency of his Jello. Or how about the testicular cancer in 251? All he does is look at dirty magazines and cry. Room 247 talks to herself, but at least she keeps herself amused.

“You got Green’s chart?” Nick asks.

“Right there, by your elbow. Prescott’s upping her meds, too.”

“Six milligrams?”

“When you’re dealing with the kind of pain she’s dealing with, six milligrams feels like a drop in the ocean.”

“I know,” Nick says, as though he really did. He flips open the chart and scans the medical history.

ADMISSION Hx

Name: Green, Sabrina Marie
Admission: 5/29/2008
Arrival Time: 4:30pm
Hx Obtained From: All Saints Episcopal of Ft. Worth

Admitting Diagnosis: Leukemia
Age: 23
Ht in Ft: 5 In: 5
Lb: 118

“Leukemia...” he murmurs. “Yep. That’ll do it.”

Brenda nods while her pager goes off.

“If Mr. Peterson pushes the call button one more time,” Brenda swears, “I’m going to give him an aneurism myself.” She takes room 249 a new cup of Jello, then pops her head in Mr. Peterson’s room.

“I’ve given you all the medicine I can today.”

Mr. Peterson slides off his bed, grabs his walker and inches toward Brenda as slow as a tax return. He doesn’t say anything until he’s next to her in the doorway.

Leaning in, he whispers, “Isn’t it driving you crazy?” He stops whispering and yells when he gets to “crazy,” right in Brenda’s ear.

She leans back.

“Mr. Peterson, what’re you talking about?”

“That crazy swinger music! I can’t think or sleep or pee with that music blatin’ through my cotton-pickin’ walls!”

Sure enough, Brenda hears the sounds of a tambourine coming through the wall.

“Come on, we’ll take a walk.”

“I don’t want to walk, I want some peace of mind!”

Brenda puts a firm hand on the walker and leads Mr. Peterson into the hall.

“We’ll go down to the soda machine, ok? There’s no music over there.”

Barbara and I listen to ABBA’s “Mamma Mia” over a hand-held radio. She lies back in bed and puts five long, white fingers that end in perfect pink nails over her blind eye dramatically.

“The worst part about dying is falling apart beforehand. Why can’t I go out in a beautiful blaze of glory, like Marilyn Monroe or James Dean?”

Despite being close to fifty years old, Barbara looks exactly the opposite of somebody who’s “falling apart.” In fact, she looks like a perennial twenty-something smoldering sex-pot. Aside from being blind (from the cancer attaching itself to her occipital lobe or something), she doesn’t look like she’s sick at all.

“Didn’t Marilyn Monroe kill herself?”

Barbara runs her other hand through her long, blonde hair and admires it as it falls back onto her shoulder.

“Better to just get it over with. Maybe I should consider it.”

Instead of killing herself, Barbara drags an old photo album out from the nightstand beside the bed and sings off-key, “Yes, I’ve been brokenhearted! Blue since the day we parted! Why, why did I ever let you go?” Her thick, pouty lips form each word soulfully.

When she gets bored of the album, she flings it off the bed, not even aiming for the nightstand. It must be depressing to see pictures of yourself and your parents laughing and having fun on vacations, knowing you can't take them anymore.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could? If you could just take a weekend off from your cancer?

"This cancer better not bulge out anywhere. You know what I mean?"

I don't answer, but I know what she means.

"I've seen some forms of cancer where there's this hideous growth on the outside of the skin," she continues. "I hope mine, at least, stays inside."

Not knowing what to say to that, I look around the room. A picture of perky geraniums beams at me from the wall across from the bed. It's the only thing in the room that's not white. The flowers are supposed to make patients feel cheerful and optimistic, but the people who thought it would work obviously didn't have cancer. At least, it doesn't work for Barbara. She says she'd rather see the real thing or nothing at all. "Besides, people with cancer can't have fresh flowers in their rooms since they could be carrying diseases, so it's totally ironic."

I still like the picture. It reminds me of the geraniums my dad planted in a window box outside the kitchen. But nobody asks me.

"You think I'll make a pretty corpse?" Barbara asks.

Barbara's intolerably selfish and self-pitying, but everybody in her situation deserves to be indulged once in a while. I shrug and fall to scrutinizing her, from her impossibly blue eyes and her perfectly smooth, plastic-looking skin to her double Ds.

“You’ll make a prettier corpse than me” is my final verdict. “Not many dead people have hour-glass figures.”

I don’t expect Barbara to contradict me, and she doesn’t. She sits up in bed and clutches her chest dramatically.

“I’ve been a model, a stewardess, a teacher... I was an Olympic medalist!”

I want to ask what sport she played, but she sinks back onto the bed and sighs.

“Guess those days are over. Death’s a bitch.”

Before I can offer her the bright side, the door opens a crack and Brenda sticks her head in. I’m grateful because sometimes it’s hard to see the bright side, especially when you throw up every few hours and you have oxygen tubes in your nose—not conducive to looking attractive, and certainly not conducive to Olympic medal-winning.

Brenda opens the door a crack and says, “Mr. Peterson’s out walking. He wants to know if you could please lower the volume.”

While she’s talking, Mr. Peterson limps his way behind her. He forces the door open with his walker and bellows, “Turn off that damn flapper music before I have an aneurism!”

“I’ll turn it down,” I say, but when the door closes, Barbara turns it up a notch and smiles, her perfectly penciled eyebrows slanted devilishly over her eyes.

“If I’m gonna go out, I’m gonna go out *my* way.”

“Fair enough,” I say, and we both sing “Super Trooper” as loud as we can until Brenda comes back in and scolds us, with Mr. Peterson shouting over her shoulder, “Make it stop! Damn flappers!”

6/11/2008

Patient warned that personal radio will be confiscated if she continues to disturb others.

BR

After putting gin in his coffee every morning and again in his orange juice every afternoon, Joe says he can't even tell his cancer's malignant. When he gets a buzz (you can't get drunk in a hospital without someone getting suspicious), he tells Eagle Eye stories. "Eagle Eye" was his code name in the war. Somehow, listening to stories about his friends getting shot to smithereens in a never-ending maze of jungle makes the crap in my life seem like small potatoes.

My favorite Eagle Eye story's the one where Joe gets attacked by a cave dweller. It's not too bloody. After seeing bloody vomit and bloody diarrhea and pictures of bloody tumors all over the hospital, I just can't take any bloody stories. So, even though I feel sorry for Joe when he tells the one about losing his leg—ripped off by a land mine running from a band of terrorists called Cobra—I like the caveman story better.

"So I'm in the jungle, and there are these fern things all over the place, dense as fog, and you can't see a thing—not a damn thing!—except green. My buddies and me's hackin' away with our machetes, trying to get to the next outpost, and BLAM!"

Joe pounds one fist into his hand.

“This guy comes outta nowhere and bear-hugs my buddy Colton to death. Just takes him in his arms and squeezees him 'til his eyes pop and he folds like a lousy poker player—folds right in half!”

He wrings his hands as he says “squeeeezes.” The scar on his cheek turns bright pink from excitement. He acts out the story, flexing his muscles and making sweeping gestures, while the dog-tags around his neck swing back and forth.

“And this guy, right? He’s big and in this crazy gold armor—gold! Like a damn Elvis impersonator! And he’s short and squatty as a tank, and looks like a caveman. So my buddy Duke and I tackle him just like you tackle a bear, and we pin his arms, with him just howlin’ away like some wild cat. All the sudden, he breaks my grip and tosses me. I hit a rock and I’m out cold for ’bout five seconds.”

Joe takes a swill of straight Gordon’s London Dry from a miniature red and yellow bottle. His eyes dart back and forth as he narrates, as if he expects to see a Neanderthal in gold spandex pop out of the bathroom and ask for a hug.

“He goes for Duke’s throat, but I wake up and see him, so I just grab my machete, grit my teeth, and make a run for him, screamin’ like a banshee and waving the machete around my head like a helicopter propeller.”

Brenda comes in. She’s carrying a tray with two covered dishes and a translucent plastic medicine cup with three pills in it. The red and yellow bottle disappears under the stump of Joe’s left leg.

“How’s the patient today?”

It's hard to hear her with that mask over her face. It's supposed to be for the patient's protection, but it's really just dehumanizing.

"You're interrupting my story, Brenda."

"I am, huh? Why don't you tell it to me?"

"Can't you see I have company?"

Brenda looks around the room and raises her eyebrows. She hustles out and comes back carrying a fourth pill between two long red nails. She drops it into the medicine cup and it makes a little clicking noise against the other pills.

"Here." She winks. "Dr.'s upping your meds."

Joe waits 'til she leaves and hands the medicine cup to me. "Do what you do. It's what I love about you."

He treats himself to another swill of gin, while I take the medicine cup to the bathroom and chuck the pills into the toilet. I watch them get sucked slowly into the swirling vortex of water before they disappear down the black hole. I used to feel guilty about chucking the medicine, but Joe always tells me, "Listen love, I survived a war the natural way. If I can't survive this the natural way, then I guess I'm due to die, now, aren't I? I've had enough—I'm ready to go!" Besides, Joe says the medicine makes him loopy, and he'd rather be in pain than disoriented. Why take the pills if they only substitute one problem for another?

From the bed, Joe starts talking over the noise of the flush.

“So I just grab my machete, grit my teeth, and make a run for him. And you know what? I run him off. He just straight drops Duke on the ground, tucks tail, and bolts. Don’t that beat all?”

“That beats all,” I say.

Joe lifts Gordon’s to his lips, but stops just short of drinking. His eyes shift toward mine like he’s just remembered something, and he lowers the bottle an inch or two.

“I used to be able to run off anything, before the damn landmine. Now I can’t run at all.”

I pat Joe’s leg. The right leg, not the stump. But he shifts uncomfortably, so I stop. He finishes the bottle of Gordon’s and puts the empty bottle back under his stump.

“If I can’t outrun this, then I’m better off dying. Pass the gin.”

I pass him another Gordon’s, which I keep hidden in my bag. He gives me this cheesy salute, his way of saying thank you.

“Tell me about the time you narrowly escaped that jaguar,” I say. It’s the second least bloody story, and I love Joe’s description of the jaguar. It reminds me of the sleek, powerful jaguars at the zoo. My dad used to take me there every year before he died when I was eight. I haven’t been back to the zoo since, but I like to be reminded.

Joe tilts his head back on the pillow and smiles. “Ah, yeah, that damn jaguar. So I’m in the jungle, right? And there are these fern things all over the place...”

Brenda collapses in a chair behind the nurse's station. She just spent two hours on the phone with telemetry apologizing for room 249, who'd wandered downstairs to complain about the Jello. Naked, of course. He'd offended everyone, and almost given two old ladies another heart attack. A cardiac patient another heart attack.

"I'm telling you, Andy."

"You're telling me, huh?" Andy says. He picks a piece of lint off his scrubs. He's not as bad as the other narcissists, but he's fastidiously clean.

Brenda scoffs. "You guys have it easy. You walk in, shake the guy's hand, size him up, and give him the verdict. Then what? Then we come in, that's what. We're the ones dealing with all the tears and the rants and the crazies. We're the ones changing the bed pans and giving the sponge baths."

Two nurses go by, wheeling Room 251 to Radiology. The patient's on the bed, holding himself and sniffing. One of the nurses turns around and rolls her eyes. Andy laughs.

"Is 249 giving you a run for your money?"

Brenda snorts and grabs a water bottle from the mini fridge.

"They're all crazy. I just found out one patient's been flushing pills down the toilet. *Flushing pills!* Can you believe that?"

Andy grins and picks another piece of lint off his uniform, still in pristine condition after three months. "That's the fastest way to recover."

Brenda shakes her head. “I swear, if that one bites the dust, it’s no fault of mine. I’m not going to stand over every patient and make them swallow. I’m just going to call it ‘refusing medication.’”

Andy agrees.

Thirty minutes later, the two nurses wheel room 251 back down the hall. The patient still holds himself, moaning.

“We told you, Mr. Pearl, it’s looking better every day!” one of them croons.

Andy slaps Brenda’s knee lightly with a clipboard, and the two of them stifle laughter.

“I’m telling you,” Brenda whispers. “Crazy.”

Patient Hx
Anemia, Cancer, Chronic Headaches, Circ. Problems, GI
Problems
Last Tx: 4/29/2008
Type: Chemo

Family Hx
Cancer

Admit Hx/Additional History
Wisdom teeth removed, 4/16/2000
Lymph node biopsy, 5/21/2007

Talking with Cathy’s always a pleasant little trip into the twilight zone. She was diagnosed with catatonia before being diagnosed with cancer, so she isn’t totally “with it.” She has this “waxy flexibility” thing going on where you can move her arms, legs, or head, and she’ll just sit there in whatever position you put her in, grinning so that her

little square teeth show and mumbling the same things over and over. I like talking to Cathy because she doesn't talk about death, or worry about it. Most people with cancer don't want to deal with it, but Cathy just... doesn't. It's refreshing. So, even though conversations usually go like this:

“Hey, Cathy, how're you doin' today?”

“I'm hungry. May I have a cookie? Please carry me!”

I'm still grateful that we don't always have to talk about what new organ the cancer's attacking. It's inspiring to think of her as “unflappable,” even if it isn't necessarily by choice.

Today, Cathy's lying in bed as rigidly as a car on blocks, staring at the ceiling without blinking. Her arms stick out in front of her, slightly bent. If she'd been standing up, she would've looked like Frankenstein's monster.

“May I have a cookie?” Cathy asks. Everything she says sounds far away and garbled, like it's coming from under water.

“I don't have any cookies,” I say. “I can call Brenda if you want.”

Cathy doesn't look at me. She just lays there with her arms out, smiling. Always smiling. She even smiles when she talks, without moving her lips. It's weird, but you got to admire anyone who can keep smiling after all the stuff Cathy's been through.

“I hurt myself!”

“You did, huh? I'm sorry. How?”

“I hurt myself!”

I nod empathetically. “It’s the new pills, hmmm? They’re not helping, am I right?”

I stroke Cathy’s pretty blonde hair. It makes me sad—such pretty hair, and no one to see it. I used to have hair the color of pumpkin pie. My dad told me that. His favorite holiday was Thanksgiving, he said, just for the pumpkin pie. Now my hair’s gotten course and dull, and I keep finding wads of it in the shower drain. I wish I had Cathy’s hair.

“I’m sleepy.”

“I’ll ask Brenda to bring some more codeine. Maybe we’ll get you one of those PCA things, where you can control the meds. Hmm... that might not work for you, huh?”

I hate to feel like I’m talking to myself, so I turn Cathy’s head to face me. Her blue eyes stare vacantly over her freckled nose like I’m a kaleidoscope and she’s looking into me, hypnotized.

“Just sit tight ‘til Brenda’s here, ok? I’ll tell you a story.”

I prop Cathy up in bed, and put her arms down at her sides. She doesn’t resist, but I still strain with the effort. Even moving a tiny girl requires upper body strength, and I have zippo upper body strength.

“Tell me a story,” Cathy says.

“I said I would, didn’t I? Give me a sec to get you situated. Sheesh! It’d be a lot easier if you helped out!”

“I love you. Do you love me?” she sings in her tinny, garbled voice.

I tear up a little, which is silly, since Cathy says that all the time. It makes me feel bad that I snapped at her. “I love you, too,” I say, and pull the sheets up to her chin.

“Alrighty, about that story... Ok, I got one. Once there was this beautiful little girl with blue eyes, freckles, and blonde hair...”

“Please brush my hair.”

“Alright, I’ll brush your hair if you stay quiet and listen, ok? You need to rest until Brenda gets here.”

I take a brush out of the drawer in the bedside table and the boar’s hair bristles go right through her hair, like a skiff over smooth waters. Her hair gets boring to brush, but I do it ’cause Cathy asks me to. Because she loves me.

“Where was I? Oh, yeah. So this girl with blonde hair and freckles is playing with her dolls, when all the sudden, her Mom comes in crying and says, ‘I have the results from the doctor. You have cancer!’ So the little girl freaks out, and tries to ru—”

“What can we do now? Let’s play house.” Cathy smiles.

“What? I’m in the middle of a story!”

“Let’s play school.”

“Listen, Cathy,” I say, laying down the brush. “It’s got a happy ending, I promise. Come on, you want to hear the end, right?”

Silence. Blank stare.

Works for me. The nice thing about Cathy is that you can interpret her silences almost like you can interpret her words. I interpret her silence to mean, “Yes, make sure it has a happy ending.”

I start brushing her hair again and continue.

“So, okay, the little girl freaks out, and tries to run, right? She just takes off running, right through America all the way to New York. She passes the Statue of Liberty and runs right over the ocean to Norway, only it’s too cold there, so she runs through Russia to China to... I don’t know what’s after China... Ok, so she runs down to Australia, where it’s warm, you know? And she keeps running, thinking she can run away from the cancer, and soon she ends up right back at home, in Texas. And you know what? Her Mom is standing there, and all her dolls are lying around, and her Mom says, ‘Guess what? While you were gone, the doctor called and said he was wrong. There was a mix-up with the reports, and you don’t have cancer.’”

Cathy smiles at me, but it’s the same smile as always.

“Come on, isn’t that a good story? The little girl beat the cancer!”

Brenda comes in, her white plastic Crocs squeaking across the white tile floor. She puts a medicine cup on the bedside table and winks. Then she trundles off, humming, “I Will Survive.” Easy for her to sing. But Cathy doesn’t notice the irony.

“It must be nice, huh, Cathy? Being safely cocooned in that little world of yours?”

I smile to myself.

“You ever gonna turn into a butterfly, Cathy? Maybe when you die?”

“I love you. Do you love me?”

I smile and run a hand through my hair. There’s a giant knot in the back. I try and untangle it gently, but the whole knot comes out in my hands. I try not to think about it.

Instead, I think about Cathy as a butterfly, flying away from this fog of monotony, of nothingness.

“You know I love you. Now you rest, ok?”

“Give me a kiss.”

I lean over and plant a light kiss on Cathy’s cold, smooth forehead.

“Get some rest. I’ll stay ‘til Brenda comes back and talk to her about your meds.”

Cathy smiles, and doesn’t respond. Looking out the window, I see these two birds nestle in a little sapling, chirping sweetly. Their colorful feathers against the green of the tree are refreshing. Even the drab grays and dull blacks outside are a refreshing change from the white-washed world of the hospital room. I wonder if Cathy sees the birds. Or if she really sees anything. I turn Cathy’s head gently toward the window.

Activity: ad lib

IV sol.: D5W 100 cc/hr Location: R FA #18 cr 200

Medications: Feosol 1 tab, Theragran 1 tab, Tylenol ES 1 tab, Prednisone 10 mg

PRNs: morphine 6 mg q 1 hr IVP, Zofran 4 mg q 12 hr IVP

Tx: neutropenic precautions—no fresh fruit/flowers, nurses/doc must wear mask/gloves/gown, reverse isolation

Vital Signs: q 4

I ask Markus if he’s devastated ‘cause he had his whole life ahead of him, but now he’s got cancer and he probably won’t live to see twenty. I put it way more delicately, don’t worry.

He leans a thin brown arm around his IV pole and grabs a green memo pad.

-Hard 2 talk about death, he writes.

I'll never understand why Markus makes jokes about being mute. At first I thought he did it as a defense mechanism, but he makes jokes about everything—even having cancer. He's been mute for over three years now, ever since the cancer moved to his larynx.

“Be serious,” I say. “Aren't you devastated?”

He takes his time writing. He doesn't like text messaging, so conversations take forever. It's especially hard when he gets excited and writes in this weird shorthand that I don't always get, but it's worth it. At least Markus doesn't complain too much about dying or get too weirdly enthusiastic about it.

-Why should I be?, he writes. -I had a good life. Captain of b-ball team for 2 years. 22 pt./game scoring average. Pro-record good.

“Because you had your whole career ahead of you. You could have been the next Michael Jordan!”

Markus does one of his silent laughs. His eyes, shaped like gumdrops and brown as molasses, always slant like he's laughing, even when no sound comes out. It makes his cheeks dimple. Between that and his perfectly round nose, he looks like a grown up infant, especially since his face is so round. Chemo'll do that to you—make your face swell up like a balloon. He has nice hair, though. It looks like yarn and makes a perfectly round afro. Everybody's got better hair than me.

-Been a lot of 'next Michael Jordans', he writes, while I rub his hair. He slaps my hand away and writes, -Bryant, James. I could of been better than all them.

"That's what I mean. That doesn't upset you?"

From the hall, a pleasant female voice crackles to life over the loudspeaker. "Code Blue, room 241. Code Blue, room 241." The voice sends nurses and doctors running down the hall. The noise should be depressing, especially considering our conversation, but Markus smiles.

-See? That could of been me. I got 2 b grateful. Least I'll live longer than that guy.

The whole time he's writing, I tell him what a terrible joke that is.

After that, neither of us say anything for a long time. The Code Blue announcement stops, so that when I'm not talking, the room is too quiet. The muffled sounds of doctor's orders, machine hums, and nurses' feet float through the walls like the distant echoes of a dream.

I turn on the T.V. and leave it on ESPN, where the Celtics are crushing the Lakers 89 to 54. Markus and I watch for a few minutes. Some guy for the Celtics does this super fancy dunk, and the crowd goes wild, while the guy runs around the court giving everybody who's sitting near the sidelines a high-five. Next there's a shot of the Lakers guy who was supposed to be guarding the dunker. He's on his knees, which are spread out on the court, with his head in both hands. It looks like he's crying, which is weird because you'd think he'd get used to losing sometimes. But losing always hurts, I guess.

Markus begins scribbling.

-I could of made that shot.

My face must have betrayed my pity, 'cause he writes:

-I know it. I told you so u know it. Y does it matter?

“‘Cause you could have been out there doing it instead of telling people,” I say.

The crowd on T.V. hadn't gotten quiet, even after the dunker quit showing off and the game continued.

-U trying to rain on my parade?

“No,” I say truthfully. “I just don't get it, that's all.”

I imagine Markus on his knees with his head in his hands, crying. But Markus keeps those brown eyes glued to the dunker, who'd just gotten another rebound and was racing up the court.

-U spend 2 much time with Babs, he writes, without even looking at the pad. I don't say anything, so he writes:

-Life's a game. You give 100% 'til you drop. I haven't dropped yet.

I avert my gaze from the T.V., where guys in yellow and white uniforms run, jump, guard, and pick—stuff Markus will never do again.

“What position did you play?”

-Point Guard

“That's the primo position in offense, right?”

Markus nods, and scrawls on his memo pad:

-Now I play defense.

After all the chemo and the codeine and the red Jello and the white walls, Markus is still smiling. I pick up his hand and hold it, and the world stands still for a moment.

“You play a mean defense,” I say.

-It’s the best offense, he writes. -U hungry?

I’m starving, so I push the button on the bed for Brenda. She doesn’t come, of course, because she’s with the Code Blue. There’s a pack of crackers in my bag, so I get it out, and we bite off the corner of each cracker before we eat the middle.

The Lakers end up beating the Celtics by six points. It’s weird how life changes on a dime. I imagine the dunker with his head in his hands in the locker room.

I wake up with a throbbing headache. I think about talking to Barbara, who’s sure to complain with me (complaining can be very therapeutic), but I don’t want to end up talking about how pretty her funeral will be. I talk to Joe instead.

Turns out Joe has a headache, too.

“Know what we’d do to cure headaches in the war?”

Joe brings a bottle of Gordon’s from under his stump and laughs until the whole plastic frame of the hospital bed shakes. His laugh reminds me of my dad’s. My dad had a laugh that would register on the Richter scale. And we’re not talking a three. We’re talking a five, at least.

“Ugh, laughing hurts.” Joe takes a pull from his bottle and passes it to me. I know I shouldn’t have any, but I gotta admit, after a while, I feel much better.

6/14/2008 2142 pm

Found pt. in room drinking ETOH. Pt. states approximately 200 mls. from bottle found were consumed, but claims to have “gone through 3 bottles” since admitted. Bottle taken from pt. and given to security. Charge nurse and doctor notified.

BR

Markus knows I’ve been drinking with Joe. When he tells me to cut it out, I ask him why. He does his silent laugh.

-Drinking’s what bad kids do.

“What about that name tattooed on your butt?” I tease. “Those hospital gowns can be pretty revealing! Aren’t tattoos for ‘bad kids’?”

It’s hard to know when Markus blushes because his cheeks are always a little rosy, but I can tell I’ve embarrassed him.

-Want to play basketball?, he writes, changing the subject.

My eyes move to his monitor, hooked into him in a million places. Besides that, Markus doesn’t breathe well, so they have him on oxygen—just more tubes. I try to imagine him playing basketball with an oxygen tank on his back, but the picture is so depressing that I shake my head to get the thought out of my mind.

“Sure.”

There’s a sink in the back of the room where doctors and nurses wash their hands. Markus takes a piece of paper from his pad, wads it up, and chunks it at the sink. The paper wad lands in the metal basin, bounces up an inch or two, and then comes to rest right in the drain.

“Nice shot,” I say, as he hands me a paper wad. I try and flick my wrist just like I saw Markus do, but my paper wad lands on the green plush chair they have for visitors.

“Would’ve been a great shot if I was going for the chair.”

Within twenty minutes, we’re hurling paper wads in all directions: at the sink, at the chair, at each other. We even hurl them at Brenda when she comes in.

“What the heck’s going on in here?”

“We’re playing basketball.”

“Well, guess who has to clean this up? If you want exercise, you can just tell me and we’ll wheel you down to PT!”

Markus and I look at each other, smiling. We’re thinking the same thing: Brenda has no right to take that tone.

“You know, I bet it’s boring to sit around in bed all day. Guess who has to do that?” I say in this low, growly voice, which sounds just like Brenda’s, matching it tone for tone.

She stops picking up the paper wads and gives me a “Who do you think you are?” stare.

“Markus, watch this—I’m the next Michael Jordan!”

We’ve run out of paper, so I take the notebook cover and flick my wrist. The notebook cover flies through the air in a perfect arch and the metal coil part hits Brenda right on the head. I howl with laughter and Markus’ cheek’s dimple, but Brenda just threatens to get a sedative and storms out in a huff to go write her report. Perhaps she’ll say Markus is making progress.

“These people act like they’re three years old sometimes!” Brenda says to Faye, one of the janitors, who’s been pretending to dust the same square foot of desk for 15 minutes. “I’m afraid if you’re headed in there any time soon, you’re not going to like what you find. Paper and crap everywhere! Throwing it around like a sugared-up toddler at a birthday party!”

Faye shakes her head good naturedly. “Gives me a job, though, don’t it?”

Brenda sighs and pulls a chart from the shelf. She wanted someone to commiserate with.

“Yeah, well. If I could take messes large or small, I’d want ’em small.”

Bored of Brenda’s tirade, Faye begins dusting the parts of the nurse’s station that really need dusting.

“I have a dreeeeeeaaaaaaaaaam—a fantaseeeeeeeeeeee—to help me throoooouuuugh—reeeaaaaaaaliteeeeeeee.”

“Oh yeah?” I say, interrupting Barbara’s song. ABBA, of course. “What was your dream?”

Barbara turns up her small, pinched nose and immediately switches off the radio. She picks up her photo album, thumbing through it deliberately, and sending out all kinds of “go away” vibes.

“It’s just a song. No fantasy’s gonna help me through this. I’m dying in a pathetic little corner of the world—jobless and boyfriendless.”

I start to say something, but she cuts me off.

“Ugh! I should’ve married Ken Carson and moved to Memphis when I had the chance! Did you know Ken was a doctor before he became a country singer?”

“You know,” I say. “I had an interesting dream last night.”

Barbara doesn’t answer. No doubt she’s thinking of her lost opportunities in Memphis.

“I had this dream that you and I went to an ABBA concert. We’re talking front row seats. We could almost reach out and touch Agnetha’s bell-bottoms.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Guess who went with us?”

Barbara shrugs, but she flips the pages of the photo album slowly, and her eyes aren’t on the pictures. Instead, they’re a little glazed, like she’s thinking.

“Andy and Nick.”

At this, Barbara’s head snaps up and the photo album slides out of her hands and onto her lap.

“Andy? The hunky oncology resident?”

She slits her eyes a little.

“Were you with Nick or Andy?”

I try not to laugh. “Oh, I was with Nick. You were with Andy, definitely. He couldn’t keep his eyes off you. Or his hands.”

This satisfies her, and she settles into her pillow, smiling. She turns the radio on again and lowers the volume.

“Ok, so what happened?”

I have to think fast. I’m making it all up, of course—one more minute of Barbara’s pessimism and one of us was going to explode. Probably me.

“Ummm, we were all dancing, right by the stage. We’re dancing so well that Bjorn is like, ‘Guys, you have to come and dance with us onstage.’ So we do, and you and Andy dance this wicked solo to ‘Voulez Vous.’ You’re so good that ABBA asks you to join the band and... uh...”

Barbara’s pink lips hang open. She’s drinking this in.

“Uhh, so you say you can’t join the band, right? Because you have cancer and you have to take it easy. But Andy says he’s got something to tell you: they mixed up the reports and you don’t really have cancer.”

“I don’t?”

“No. And your eye is gonna heal, too. It was just over-exposure to the sun from tanning or something. Then Andy sweeps you off your feet, and you both become part of ABBA and they rename the band ‘ABBABA.’”

Barbara squeezes my hand.

“I once heard a bonafide psychologist say that dreams act like windows to the future,” she says. “Do you believe that?”

“Oh yeah,” I say, nodding my head in an exaggerated up and down motion.

“Definitely.”

“Things always work out in the end, don’t they? I knew there was a reason I didn’t marry Ken!” Barbara turns the radio up and sings along.

“Room 251’s getting discharged, huh?” Andy says. “Looks like you only have three more to go.”

Brenda stands near the sink, lathering her hands with chemically-smelling soap.

“Four more. And they’re not going anywhere. Especially if they keep flushing meds.”

Brenda turns on the hot water and makes a face trying to rinse off the soap without getting burned.

“But if I could pick two to go,” she continues, “it’d be Mr. Godiva and Ms. I-Love-ABBA.”

“ABBA?”

“Yep. ‘Waterloo’ all night long. Thought Mr. Peterson was going to kill himself. Or her.”

Andy laughs as the loudspeaker crackles to life and calls him to surgery.

“Well, no rest for the weary. I’m off to watch Dr. Prescott do a biopsy.” Andy starts down the hall, but turns around and shouts, “Could be worse—could be Boy George!”

“Nothing’s worse than ‘Gimme A Man After Midnight’ at four in the morning!” Brenda yells as the double doors at the end of the hall swallow Andy.

Physician’s Orders

6/16/2008 1305pm

Morphine 8 mg IVP q 1 hr. prn pain

VOV Charles P. Prescott, M.D./Brenda Rowlands, R.N.

Today I can barely sit up in bed. Every part of me aches, like I've been exercising—which I most certainly haven't. I'm tired and my head's pounding. I try and think how Cathy must be feeling, and muster up just enough sympathy to decide I have to talk to her.

"Hey Cathy," I say. "Want a cookie?" I rummage through my bag and bring out a package of crackers. Ok, so they're not cookies, but it's not like Cathy'll complain.

Cathy smiles up at me. Usually, though she only responds with gibberish, her blue eyes have something in them that makes you wonder if she understands every word you say.

But today Cathy's eyes are flat blue discs. The something's gone.

"Want me to tell you a story? I'll borrow one of Joe's. He tells this one about..."

"I'm sleepy," Cathy says. Her voice sounds even more sluggish than usual.

"I know what you mean. I got, like, zippo sleep last night."

Last night I couldn't stop thinking of my dad. I had this image of us at the zoo stuck in my head.

"You know, I got a better story. My dad used to take me to the zoo a lot. One time, one of the girl baboons totally fell in love with my dad, no joke. We think it's 'cause he kind of looked like a baboon with his beard..."

I'm so tired. Just getting the story out takes effort, and I can tell Cathy isn't listening. That's when I see it. Cathy's labored breathing slows down. Her chest begins to rise and fall less frequently.

"Cathy?"

Her eyes are glazed.

"Oh, God!" I whisper. "Cathy? Don't you want to hear the end of my story?"

Cathy's arms go limp and fall to her sides, and her chin falls to her chest, which stops moving.

"No! Cathy? Cathy! That's not the end of the story!"

But it's the end of Cathy's story. I put my arms around her and kiss her forehead through a hot rain of tears, soaking her pretty hair in sweat and mucous. She still has that painted on smile, but her whole body goes stiff like plastic and her eyes become get completely dull. I weep until my reservoir of tears runs dry and I have none left.

6/21/2008 0412 am

Found pt. in room crying uncontrollably. Offered medication, but patient refused. Pt. says her depression is not pain related.

BR

I've been sitting with Cathy almost an hour, crying and praying. I know I can push the call button for Brenda, but sometimes you don't want to be comforted. Sometimes you want to feel miserable and hate the world and renounce it for being totally unfair.

But on the heels of that thought, as true as it is unpleasant, comes another thought. More like a phrase, actually—something Cathy used to say. She only said about eighteen things, so it was never hard to keep track. This phrase keeps running through my head, over and over: “Please take me with you.” She said it every time I left her room. “Where are you going? Please take me with you.” That’s when I realize, Cathy didn’t talk gibberish. She just said the things that matter: “May I have a cookie?” and “I love you.”

I look around the room. There’s that same stupid geranium picture glaring at me from the white walls, and the green chair, and the sink, and that’s it. There are no flowers or knick-knacks. No people pressing Kleenexes to their eyes and noses. But none of that matters. Cathy’s up in Heaven by now, where there are all kinds of colors and all kinds of people who’ll love her and brush her hair and tell her stories. She’s probably up there dancing. She’s happier, I know it.

And it hits me. If Cathy is happier, that means death can be ok. For the first time, I imagine myself up in Heaven after I die, eating cookies with Cathy. I imagine playing one-on-one with Markus—Markus wins, of course. I imagine Barbara in tacky white bell-bottoms shaking hands with Benny and Anni-Frid, singing church hymns to a jazzy beat. I imagine Joe running through the pearly gates and being reunited with his buddies Duke and Colton, swapping gin and stories. Finally, I see my dad with his arms open, waiting for me. I decide I’m in Markus’ camp: Life’s a game. You give 100% and then you croak. And that’s not so bad.

Outside, the sun peeks over the horizon. Within twenty minutes, the room floods with light. Birds chirp a eulogy in the tree near the window. I turn Cathy's head toward them and watch them sing until I'm overcome and I fall asleep.

Brenda heads toward room 247 to check the oxygen sats on the monitors and bring the 8 o'clock pills. As she gets closer to the door, she hears the roar of a television crowd and an announcer detailing some MVP's scoring average.

She enters the room backwards, using her butt to open the door. As soon as she turns around and sees the bed, she stops humming. She puts the chart and the pills down on the bedside table. She won't need them.

The patient is lying with her mouth and eyes open. Even though she's facing the window, Brenda's seen enough death to know she's gone. The body's stiff, the arms wrapped rigidly around a blonde-haired doll.

Brenda struggles to free the doll from the patient's death grip.

"My God!" she whispers. The doll is a vintage Chatty Cathy, probably worth a fortune on e-bay. Unable to resist, she flips the doll on her back and pulls the string. The voice sounds tinny and hollow—the motor is dying. "Too bad," she says. Her curiosity's piqued. She picks up another doll, but it's nothing special—a Cabbage Patch doll with green sharpie squiggles on the mouth.

She picks up the last doll as Andy comes in, straightening his jacket.

"How's the patient?" he says. Then he sees the bed. "Oh."

“Look at this!” Brenda says, holding up the doll. “It’s Patient Barbie! Kind of cute, huh?”

“What’s that thing on her eye?”

“I don’t know. A stain or something. Look at the little hospital gown!”

“Weird,” Andy says.

“Cute,” Brenda corrects him. She takes the Chatty Cathy and the other dolls and dumps them in the green visitor’s chair.

Andy skirts the edge of the bed and looks at the monitors. “I’ll call Dr. Prescott,” he says. “You get her cleaned up.”

Brenda follows Andy out of the room and returns with a sponge and a tub of warm water. The weight of the tub makes her arms sore. Water sloshes over the side when she sets it down on the bedside table, soaking a green memo pad and seeping onto a photo album. Brenda takes the memo pad and chucks it in the trash. She wipes the water off the photo album with the end of her scrubs, getting them all wet—she’ll be off in an hour anyway. Curious, she opens the album and flips through a few pages. All the photos depict a pretty red-head with a burly, bearded man—at the park, at a birthday party, at the zoo. Brenda looks at the girl in the bed, and clucks her tongue. It always amazes her how cancer transforms them.

She hears Faye wheeling the cleaning cart down the hall and pops her head out the door.

“Hey, we’re going to need this room cleaned in a bit.”

Faye nods, frowning. "I know what that means. Too bad. Part of the job, though, I guess."

Brenda nods. "Give me about 20 minutes."

She closes the door again and begins unplugging the monitors and removing the oxygen tubes and IV. She moves what's left of the patient's hair from her face and wipes the sweat from her forehead with the sponge. Of all the dirty chores she has to undertake, cleaning the dead's the worst.

She goes to clean the legs, and finds a fourth doll, a beat up old G.I. Joe with a missing leg, wrapped in the sheets. She tosses him toward the green chair and misses. The doll lands with a plastic clatter on the floor.

After she's done, she strokes the patient's flushed, swollen cheek and turns her head toward the ceiling.

"Poor thing," Brenda croons, letting pity sweep over her as she stares at the patient's glassy brown eyes. She goes to close them, but doesn't.

She looks out the window instead. The room has a nice little view of the tree-lined walkway leading up to the main hospital entrance. When she turns toward the room again, her eyes have to adjust to the dim light.

"They really should add some color in here," she says to herself, and leaves the body to go fill out the paperwork.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to explode and/or expand the definitions of “projection” as a coping method. Finally, I hope that my stories prove the need for a new definition of “projection” that reflects all of the complexities that arise from its adaptive and maladaptive use as a defense mechanism. Furthermore, I attempted to create stories that employ the concepts of the “shadow” and the doppelgänger in an unconventional manner—namely, with positive outcomes, as well as with traditionally negative outcomes.

In fact, all of these concepts (projection, the “shadow,” and the doppelgänger) are difficult to accurately define (and represent) since they describe psychological processes which are exhibited in numerous ways dependent upon the psychological make-up of the individual. This fact made the concepts of projection, the “shadow,” and the doppelgänger particularly challenging to capture in my work, since my aim was to vary the purpose and manifestation of different characters’ projections of different aspects of themselves. However, the challenge of writing about various uses of projection proved invaluable to my growth as a writer as it allowed me the opportunity to experiment with character by imagining how very different personalities would use the same coping method to deal with crises.

As previously mentioned, my stories attempt to portray characters in a way that emotionally engages readers and elicits their sympathy for these characters, regardless of differences in plot, setting, mode of narration, theme, etc. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “Find

the key emotion; this may be all you need know to find your short story.” I believe this is as true for all writing as it is for the short story. Without emotion, characters are flat, plot is pointless, conflict is impossible, and the whole exercise of writing becomes merely a laundry list of tedious details. Thus, while I hope that the stories include here successfully explore the theme of projection which will lead to further reflection upon the subject from my audience, I am also attempting to expose enough emotion to warrant a sigh, a tear, or a laugh from the reader.

From here, I plan to continue my writing, mostly in longer venues than the short story. I have begun a screenplay loosely based on the short story “The Sandman” that re-imagines the Sandman’s fictional origins. In the screenplay, I further develop the relationship between Lily and the Sandman and provide an intricate back-story that explains how and why the Sandman became the iconic figure that he is today. In addition, I have begun a Young Adult novel that follows two sisters into the Book World via an enchanted elevator. I am excited about both of these works in progress, and am grateful for the research experience gained through the writing of this thesis, as it will help me immeasurably when researching, completing, and polishing later works.

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